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Sleepwalking into the Mirror: Panic and the Thin Skin of a Writer

Joanne Scicluna

Reflections and Observations on Sitting with Hills
Elizabeth McQueen

Understand me, I don’t mean to scorn the reader and his desire, as naïve as it is legitimate, to be carried away by the novel’s imaginary world and to confuse it occasionally with reality’. Milan Kundera. (1986: 34)

I took the brown house next door because it was abandoned and I strung myself like the ivy through its eaves. I imagined my narrator there. The woman who used to live there brought me driveway lilies once, when I mowed her nature strip.

I took the brown house and shifted them all across the road to where a man called K lives in a house of men. My imposition was easy; the boards under their eaves have rotted away. K. brought me two trays of frozen Spanikopita once. He borrows my lawn mower. Once, he borrowed my beat-up garage for one of his beat-up cars for two months, three months, max. Three years later, I asked him if he could get it out now and he did. Three months later.

A lawn mower starts up.
No, it doesn’t. It’s just a connection between three backyards.

The woman who brought me driveway lilies packed her dirty green Toyota wagon, her cross-eyed cat and shifted to her boyfriend’s in Richmond. Stray cats grow in K.’s backyard. Base camp: cars without doors. They spread their claws and piss around the boards of my green house and all over the brown house next door.
A man appears on the street, walking with his back slanting back, trying to catch up with his legs.

I knew a man once, becoming addicted to heroin. He walked with his palms facing out: what's happening and what do I get? As he became his addiction, his hands hung lower and lower, but his palms still faced out. He poured bowls of sugar onto his Cornflakes.

A lawn mower is starting up. Shh.

The little boy sleeps and the veils of fiction are falling from your fingers. You can't grip them anymore, you can't even press open the pegs on the clothesline. Your mouse wrist grows thick. You write too much. Just tell them.

Dad came and mowed the lawn that day, dead flat the grass. Got out his blower and blew the dry bits away on a windy day. He's got a thing about diosmas; makes mushrooms and caravans. But that is a digression. I ask him not to snipper the edges because the weeds are all that's holding up the garage. One side wall is bowed, it'll burst one day, spit nails and the boards fall clack, clack, clacking down. The corrugated roof will clang itself mute in the stale dust. But he always does.

Dad made the backyard a bowling green, proud before a fall.

But the narrator will like it, she'll sit on the back step and find peace in the sight of cut grass. But you'll have to get her home first and it's taking you weeks to avoid the eyes of a drunk guy on the train. She emerges from the station and - even though he turns the other way - you still send her home through the midnight gardens, running.

She's no heroine. She's a victim of your imagination.

If I tell you what's in my novel before I finish, will I finish? The unconscious doesn't care; wants to utter once and be done.

**Shering. Shering. Shering.**

A mantra was whispered in my ear just before the price went up from four hundred to nine hundred dollars. My brother paid; a gift for my psyche. The word arose, the TM instructor said, with me in mind. Sacred. Don't utter to anyone.

**Shh.** Remember the night. The little boy sleeps in orange and black like Hallowe'en. He throws the quilt back. Listen. Do you hear them? Men's voices on the wind outside.
A woman appears at the edge of a pine forest, breastfeeding a baby. Before her spreads an acre of excavated ground. She breaks the suction and lifts her face. Who is she? She is looking for the trees. They were there when she woke up last. She shivers. A truck rolls away over the mud.

The wind is breaking them up: the voices must float from the other side, the brick villa where the brothers from Taiwan live, under a dish in the back half of a dual occ.

A house out the back is yardlocked. Don’t you want to see the road? All roads lead to the sea, don’t you want to see the sea?

Shh. The villa is empty. They’re out all night at the bower house, the woman in the front half always says. Oh, I say, but I still don’t know what a bower house is.

Forget your ears and the moaning on the wind outside. Keep writing. Just one ear open for a little boy. You even forget him, drifting through rooms. You jump to see him in your bed.

He sleeps through anything. Even himself walking. He comes early to your bed tonight. He shouldn’t be there when his mother is not. And when she is. He’s too big, it’s weird, he won’t know his place, what’s his. Habit. When he walks in, turn him around and walk him back.

The Vietnamese people slept together. That’s how they won the war against the Americans.

He is safer in my bed, while I set my skin.

I have beaten it and stretched it thin around the grey walls of this back room, this one half of a once-verandah, closed up to let the laundry inside. I’ve let the wind blow me out, whatever it is, out, while the bugs spit like rain into the keys of this old grey laptop. I keep thinking of toughening the interior: block the draught from the fallen short panes of glass. Paint the boards a brighter colour.

But writing is superstition. It is from grey and where the walls are thinnest that stories come.

A little black cat appears when I’m smoking on my back step because I can’t write.
A little black cat appears when I’m sitting on the back step, not smoking, because I still can’t write.

My friend says that the cat is a gift from my psyche.

They were everywhere: on my back step, slunk into my novel, their bodies thumping against my walls. I hired a cat trap, bought a carrier, had the local vet lined up. I’ll bring ‘em in, I said, if I can trap ‘em. I don’t know how they got the meat; my own breath would drop the door.

I supplied the whole camp on my mince kitchen.

One territory can’t hold them all. They emerge from old cars and fan through the suburbs in a mosaic pattern, until the ones pushed under the final paling fences, run like boys with wet spiked hair, for the forests, to grow fatter, wetter.

They’ll drink aspirin milk in barns.
Their blood will thin, but never thin enough.

I roll my chair back from my grey laminate desk that took two men, cursing, to get in.

People with strong arms and backs, watch them. They fall from your life.

I walk raw in my grey novel skin past the slatted windows of the laundry and into the kitchen. That’s where the light for the laundry is. And the laundry light has to be on for the light above the back step to be on.

We light up together.

There’s a man in my backyard carrying my mop. He’s where the cat used to be waiting for milk.

I keep forgetting to tell you. The cats have gone, been gone for weeks.

A woman wakes up in the dark. She starts running, stumbling over the mounds, the baby’s blanket dropping in the mud. She’s chasing the tail lights of the truck. But it’s all in her mind.
I tell the operator I know him. No I don’t know him. I mean I know where he lives, I’ve seen him.

I don’t know him. All I wanted was the way that he walks: trying to keep up with his legs and his mouth dragged down down. We judge people not by the company but the places they keep: drug-beaten in the city becomes weather-beaten in the bush.

He lives in a block of brown flats. I look for ugliness to back up my mind. I say there are no trees in his front yard, refuse with European eyes to see a single shining gum. I manipulate the landscape like a colonial artist, chopping vistas through the bush.

The job of a writer is to make connections.

An operator’s job is to connect you with where you are:

America. A snatch of documentary, a woman’s breath breaking up while her ex rampages outside. The operator says, keep calm, the police are on their way, but the man gets in and her voice keeps recording over the re-enactment of her murder.

A pigeon palpitates on the grass by the old incinerator. A fat tom sits, smiling over his shoulder at me and my little boy peeping through knotholes. Pssst, I say, and the tom slinks away. Run, I say and we bolt next door, untying the blue string on the gate. We walk the planks of the fallen side fence and wade through the wandering jew. The cat amongst the pigeon is long gone.

Didn’t I tell you? The cats have been gone for weeks.

I am an ear and a hand to hold the phone up.
Don’t think for a minute that this will make your writing better.

Where is the man?
He’s banging on the back door.
Who is with you?
How old is he?
And where is he now?

Shh. The vision of him sleeping grounds me. I lie. I just don’t want to wake him. He’s orange and black, already in my bed, got in early tonight. Sometimes when he wakes, he says he can’t move and he can’t call.

His bedroom can stay a bloody shrine, till he learns to walk through walls.

Can you look out the window? Tell me what he’s doing.

I am a mouth in the phone and a hand that holds my ear up.

It’s the car, it’s just your car, it’s in the way. He just wants to get out.

The mop handle bangs on my bedroom wall. Ceramic shatters on the boards. That’s the Steiner that dad gave me; my umbrella stand means he’s on the verandah. Oh, so you leave it outside, Dad said. That’s it for me and the steptoes from his garage. No more tin knights of the Order of St John. No more brass vases from Greek ships.

If he’s heading for the front door, that’s….
Shall I whisper to the operator about being eight months: hosing down the front of the house, how the door swelled and wouldn’t shut and we planed it back, then in the warm it shrunk. The latch hangs by the tip of a brass lip. One shoulder and he’ll push through.

My bones are the poles of a dome tent, bending over emptiness. I have no plans. The dynamics change, my friend said, when they’re inside your house. But I could not pierce his skin. I’ll stay the tent and collapse, a heap of polyester at his feet.

This is the recurring dream, or is it a photograph, your mother in front of the garage with mission brown pinstripes and you running up the driveway, but it’s lifting, concrete hills undulating, till the earth tips you and all the trees off.

Writing is the exploration of being out of time. Temporizing won’t save you now.

The job of an operator is to keep you calm till you’re saved.

The man will tell the police that he was trying to visit friends in the brown house next door.

So I summoned this, him swelling over my fence, because I sat in a grey room divining. I forgot to ask for the highest good.

The job of an operator is to keep you calm till you’re dead.

Stop there. Stop there. Shh. The operator says that the police are outside. You can go out and see them. It’s safe.

He’s a harmless old coot, the policeman says. I know him.

The police are getting younger. Why does this always surprise me?

I have to know if his appearance is a mistake of geography or my body mistaken. He knows me now. Now that I’ve had him in my backyard.

I compete for the policeman’s compassion.

He looks at me: like a victim of my imagination.

He won’t remember a thing tomorrow.

But he was vibrant in my yard, his blue eyes gleamed in the light under the eaves. His hair looked washed, his cheeks had form. He saw me like he never saw me on the street. All those times he didn’t say hello.

I want to see him in daylight. I want to see him smile. But I cannot lift his lips. His face returns to clay.
Now that I am wedded to his vision on the path, I keep writing, yardlocked, in his nightmare.
I just keep telling myself that he is true.

The desire for a cigarette is stronger than anything else I know. Knew then.

I've thrown packets of cigarettes onto the roof of my garage. Then, in the middle of the night, I reverse my car against one half of a once-double door and climb onto the boot with a rake in my hand. I drag the packet back over the lifting sheets of corrugated iron.

Remember this: you intruded on his dreamscape. It's not your land or the landlord's either. He can be in your backyard, you don't play out there at night, why can't he play there, if, like a cat pushed from its territory, he ends up here on his way over the fences to a bigger cosmic night?

I would rather not write if I have to make the fences electric.

How do you keep your body distant, yet imagine characters fully?
Does my welcome in your eyes depend on your conviction of my fear?

I'm starting to eye off men on building sites.

How many times do writers say that their stories wrote themselves? Tell me nothing. Just tell me this: if you claim the in-between the wind and words on your page, give me the conditions: are you calm or writing in gusts that day?

You strayed into his dream. You don't know where he strays.
An isolated man in the backyard is a hop, step and smash out of the story he steals.

I tape yellow satin over the pane of glass in the back door. I hang up the summer bamboo on the inside of the slatted window.

I write fast; detail how they stopped this room from being outside: a stink pipe disappears through the pale sloping boards of the roof. A yellow globe sticks out of the wall suspended in an egg white dish. No matter how many times I check the door, nothing stops him from being outside.

I keep writing, huddled between the edges of the nightmare that doesn't end, till the novel ends. My skin is a drum for every creak, each car door slam, each voice on the street. Fat is not what you think. It's just a thin veneer and it's wobbling.

After days I rip down the satin. Worse to see nothing. Not that I look. I race through the laundry with my head down. I write on a grey laminate desk that took two men, cursing. I never wanted this desk. It's not even a gift for my psyche; it doesn't have drawers.

You should have kept writing. Left him alone to hunt ogres or jog home to give his floors a going-over.

I try quarantining the laundry at night but this disrupts the circles. A writer like a dervish needs to pace.

I am no one's half moon.

Fortified by weeks, my eyes stray to the slatted glass. Surprised not to find him, I find myself, and I am old: my body bent for keys that aren't there, dressed in a man's silk dressing gown from Vietnam.

My little boy keeps asking if there are vultures in Australia. I don't know, are there? And who
made the world. I say, some say, the Big Bang, but he thinks that’s the comet that killed the
dinosaurs, but I’m not sure, didn’t it just get too cold? Some people think a god did and
some say an eagle. He likes the story about the eagle and so do I. Eagles fly too high to tell
if they have penises or not.

A woman stands on logged ground at the edge of the highway, waiting for something to
land on her head.

Writers are children recaptured and by trying to grasp their selves bring the story back to its
beginnings.

K.’s sister out from Greece appears in my yard. She wants to borrow the mower. She says
let’s have coffee one day, I say why not now? I haven’t slept, I’m sitting on my back step,
thinking about smoking because that’s easy. And so I find myself in their backyard with a
coffee on the body of a Kingswood that I once gave K. because he put a new body around
the engine of my mower. K. smokes a rollie in front of us and I tell them about the man in my
backyard. That guy who looks like he’s chasing his legs? Oh him, K. says. Full o’ drugs. He
and his sister are silent.

What am I doing here? I write about them, now I want their protection. Or am I just checking
the sanity of my fear? Better give her your number, K.’s sister says. But K. takes down mine
instead. What’s the point of that? his sister says. K. disappears inside.

The hardest cigarette not to smoke is the one before bed. The hardest thing to learn is that
there is nothing at the end of the day.

A smoker’s excuses have many mansions.

My dishes are smoking in the sink. Let me write half as much and not live in a house with a
Ray Carver interior on a diet like the vivisector of bacon and cats.

Writers should count themselves lucky for grist. I toss the mop over the fence and wish the
brown house away.

But it’s already going, someone’s swooped in, is renovating, a small coup in this
unitocracy, a government vision that’s got tunnels in the sky. We’re going to be an activity
centre: laid out flat with bipping horns, dingling bells, ringing phones, and pianos with just
three keys. I gaze into a tiny mirror and await a transit city.

If he comes into my yard again, I will keep typing, my wrists getting thicker. Writing,
because it’s romantic to everyone else.
The job of a writer is to be alone until your friends come.

Tonight my son threw a basket of snakes in my path. As they scattered across the floor, he said: Don’t come any closer.

The job of a writer isn’t to run but to weave.

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