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Independent scholar

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Everything that matters is silvery white

Biographical note:
Dr Julia Prendergast is an independent scholar, with a PhD in Writing and Literature. Julia’s stories have been longlisted, shortlisted and published including in: Lightship Anthology 2 (UK), Glimmer Train (US), the Séan Ó Faoláin Short Story Competition (IE), Australian Book Review, Elizabeth Jolley Prize, Canary Press, TEXT, Meniscus, Bukker Tillibul, the Boroondara Literary Awards, and Writing from Below. Julia’s fiction is also forthcoming in Island Literary Magazine. Julia’s theoretical work has been published locally and internationally, including in New Writing (UK) and TEXT.

Keywords:
Creative writing – temporising – metaphor – narrative
Sarah is leaving him.
It is to be expected but Al does not expect it. He calls his wife a Ho.
He doesn’t raise his voice. He says: Ho. Holmium. Chemical symbol Ho. Phonetically slang for slut.
Sarah says: You see! You SEE!
Holmium looks like crushed tin foil. It strongly absorbs neutrons.
Sarah is crying steadily. Is it any wonder?
Holmium is used as a burnable poison in nuclear reactors.
For fuck’s sake, Al.
He makes a note of the swearing: the placement of it, the emphasis, the angular relationship between the swearing and her sadness – No – her frustration.
He sits in the leather chair, rubbing his fingers over the silver studs – Grey. Oxidised.
He is not there with her, in time. He is lusting after the silvery white, when he was desperate for more than not-so-much, when the moon was dark and luminous.

Al and Emily head out of the school grounds, down the pathway lined with lemon scented gum trees.
Al stops abruptly. I forgot my Chemistry book, he says. He drops his schoolbag at Emily’s feet. Wait for me, he says, turning towards the school building.
Potassium, says Emily, dropping her bag beside Al’s.
What?
Potassium, she says. Her voice sticks in the still air, thick, like the lemon breath of the gums. She picks at the jagged remnants of red nail polish. Al watches her fingers, thumbnail against thumbnail. He forgets the chemistry book. Her white knuckles are exposed in a vertical line, like moons, separated by shady hollows. Her thinking is luminous, like the moon, and he’s floundering somewhere in the hollows, gasping after her elsewhere thoughts.
Emily brushes her nails against the hem of her school dress. The red flecks sparkle against the hem, against her lean, bronze thigh. He thinks of rainbow trout: the fresh, wet pelt.
She looks up suddenly. C’mon Al, she says. Potassium. Chemical symbol K. I’ll wait for you, O K.
O, says Al.
O. Oxygen. Chemical symbol O
O. Spherical like the moon, ripe and luminous.

He doesn’t mention it, the chemical correlative, and he doesn’t mention the moon either. He doesn’t let on that he lusts after her thoughts.

K, he says softly. Potassium, he adds smiling.

_Hurry up Al. RUN! I’m counting to fifty then I’m out of here._

Yes, he says gasping, turning and obeying, running towards the school building, sucking the air greedily. The air sticks in his throat, thick, like her shady voice. He thinks of anaerobic organisms. Ao’s. They don’t need oxygen to survive; in some cases oxygen kills them. Reaching into the locker, he wonders if Ao’s could survive on the moon. Oxygen is not held to the moon as an atmosphere. It’s all about the ability to adapt.

He rushes back to Emily – book in hand, out of breath, pins and needles in his throat like the killing type of oxygen. He zips the book into his backpack and loops the straps over his shoulders. Still puffing, he says: _Do you think anaerobic organisms could live on the moon, you know, because the oxygen is bound up in chemicals?_

_School’s out freak,_ says Emily smiling, a speck of nail polish on her lip. He reaches towards her mouth and she draws back, flinches.

_The red,_ he says.

She puts her fingers to her lips and they walk on in silence. He looks down, keeping pace with the swish of her hem.

_It’s almost impossible to believe that the moon has no inherent silvery quality. That it’s actually..._

_Fuck Al. Walk. Don’t talk._

_Potassium,_ he says, noting the swearing, mapping its place.

Sauntering beside Emily, he can smell his boy-sweat, afternoon bitter; he can smell the slovenly tang of the lemon-scented gums. Above all else, he can smell her skin, wet and new like a clean tongue. If the moon is dark and luminous, then a smell might be luminous too, even ultraviolet or infrared. It seems possible.

Emily’s smell puddles around her collarbone. The collarbone is the only long bone in the body that lies horizontally. Emily’s smell puddles there like luminosity, wafting his way on the late spring breeze.

Emily Roberts. She abbreviates it: E.R. She marks everything with her initials rather than her full name.

Her chemical symbol is Erbium. _Er._

When it’s artificially isolated, erbium is silvery white like the moon. Pure erbium is malleable; its salts are rose coloured with fluorescent properties, ultraviolet absorption bands.
Al used to get erbium confused with herbium. Chemical symbol Y. Phonetically confused that is: he understands their make-up precisely. It’s just that II is little more than breath, slippery, like the water across the rocks in the gully creek … where the touching began.

Emily instigates the touching in the breathless gully of the smooth rocks, during the last months of their last year of school. It’s all pink rose crystals and ultraviolet absorption bands. Al would have welcomed the touching sooner, of course, years sooner, but he waited for her to start it. That’s how it was and must be, primarily because of botulism.

Botulism blocks the nerve impulses. It causes paralysis. It can be fatal.

Anaerobic bacteria produce botulinum toxins; that’s how it starts. The toxins can be ingested via food that is improperly processed. The toxins fester in anaerobic conditions, in time not oxygen. How else does the black moon become silvery white? By mirroring the sun in luminous time. We have to step outside time to see that the moon is shady.

Food that is bottled or canned at home is a concern because there’s not enough sustained heat to prevent germination. Beware home-bottlers and home-canners. That can’t be so many. Who has the resources to seal an aluminium can at home?

Aluminium. Chemical symbol Al.

Aluminium is remarkable for its ability to resist corrosion. It is highly chemically reactive. More so than not so much. Aluminium is soft and durable, lightweight. It is ductile and malleable, silvery grey.

Ductile. Like tactile. Phonetically. Not connotatively. Chemistry does not care for connotation. Ductile is not a word that Al has heard outside its chemical context. Maybe it’s there in real time but he only knows it in the story of aluminium. Wet-earth gullies. The shady hollows of her luminosity.

Ductility refers to a solid material’s ability to deform under stress. It’s like malleability, more or less, which is supposed to mean pretty much or the same, except that more is not the same, and less means that the moon is shady.

To prevent the germination of botulinum spores, aluminium tin cans may be heated to 85°C for five minutes. A tin can is a tin can, of course, and a man is a man, but a man was once a boy and his mother never touched him. He has no memory of ever being cuddled or kissed by his mother, and that leads him to thoughts of botulism. Black moons.

In the gully of smooth rocks, in the luminous puddles of her smell, Al doesn’t think about botulism and black moons. Afterwards, in the hollows, he is reminded that we don’t need so much. He is aware that the gully is not a necessity. He has lived many moons without the touching.

In the gully everything is silvery white and lustrous, clear and luminous, and he thinks that everything that matters is silvery white. Erbium and Emily Roberts. Whispering wash on smooth rocks. Shiny tin cans and the luminous moon. He also knows that we
don’t need everything that matters. Desire doesn’t have to be reciprocated. It is not based on mutual magnetism. Even dysprosium is silvery white.

Dyprosium. Chemical symbol Dy.

Dy. Phonetic equivalent Di. His mother’s name. That’s all he ever knew to call her because she wouldn’t have Mum.

I can’t abide it, she said. Abide. Only his mother uses such words in the everyday.

Dyprosium is a rare earth element with a metallic silver lustre. It is never found in nature as a free element. It is greatly affected by even small margins of impurities. Along with holmium, it has the greatest magnetic strength.

Magnetic strength is one thing, of course …

Al and Emily are drawn to the gully. Every day, on their way home, they pass through, barely talking. The gully is saddled by iron bark gums and damp, dark earth. It is council land, protected. Emily always pauses before descending. She looks around for observers, witnesses; it’s part of her pre-descent routine.

Today she lingers for longer, eyes darting, fingers busy at her hem. Al reaches for her waist, for the inner hollow of her hip.

Not up here, she says.

Emily clenches her hem, clenches and unclenches … because of his hands at her waist in real time.

I have to go home, she says. ... Fuck’s sake.

Al doesn’t swear. He never feels the compulsion. He pays particular attention to the swearing, to the context and the emotion, if he can decipher it. He undertakes some research, reading, searching for the impetus. Apparently swearing can be used for pain relief. People who don’t swear all the time can use swearing to tolerate pain. They can withstand the pain for longer if they swear. It sounds utterly ridiculous at first but he reminds himself that the moon is black and silvery white.

When Al arrives home he goes straight to his room. He stretches out on his bed for a long while. He fiddles with the blinds, altering the light, shifting slats of twilight on the dank white wall.

Fuck, he says. Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

His mother gasps from the hallway. He knows what she thinks. She thinks he’s masturbating. If she hears fuck, he must be thinking about fucking. She thinks literally, like a spider. She doesn’t see that black is luminous. She thinks children need food, not cuddling. She thinks children need clean clothing, not touching.

We don’t need so much, she says. It’s her mantra. She says it all the time – after dinner as she clears the plates, as she seals the bottles of tomato relish, as she hangs clean clothes in his wardrobe. Sometimes she abbreviates: Not so much ...
He barges out into the hallway so she can see there’s nothing stiff, nothing sexual. He holds his arms wide, palms outstretched, fingers touching the hallway walls. She scurries down the hallway on her busy spider legs, back to the kitchen.

He follows her, calling after her: Di. Di!

He stands beside her in the kitchen. She takes the speckled rainbow trout, fresh from the market, and lays it on the chopping board. She takes her big kitchen knife with the wooden handle, positioning the hefty blade under the gills, hands poised momentarily and then crunching the knife through the neck, firm, fast and steady, slicing the head off on the diagonal, exposing the pale pink flesh, such an unexpected shade of pink beneath the freckled rainbow skin. She puts the fish’s head aside on the newspaper.

He says: Apparently swearing increases the pain threshold...

Swearing is unnecessary.

I know you can’t abide it, he says.

Abide? Unnecessary is unnecessary. … She scoffs: What pain?

The water. The shallows. Cold wash on smooth rocks. Twilight slats.

He stares at the fish head. He folds the newspaper to cover the eyes, glassy and dumbstruck.

The more time he spends with Emily, the more he thinks he is getting closer to her thoughts. Time and knowing increases the luminous reflection of her elsewhere thoughts. It’s not like a mirror. The image is not clear. Luminosity is bright and shadowy together. He has passed the point of literal knowing and he wants more than not so much.

The next day, they go back to the gully. They are at ultraviolet, near infrared, when they’re interrupted – leaves crunching under school shoes on higher ground. He hears the leaves and then the laughing. He wants to finish but she hitches her undies, crying, panting. She yanks her school dress down.

Al hitches too, collecting his jumper from the ground after she stands. They walk home in silence but he’s not paying attention to the quiet. He lets his shirt hang loose, thinking of black moons and willing it to die down.

There is no warning that it’s over. He is not blind. Dead fish are blind. Time is blind. There is no warning. If the sniggering or the crunching leaves were the sign then he missed it. If his hand near her hip was the catalyst then why return the following day, the days after?

The first sign, as far as Al can see, is the timber bench, bookended by plastic buckets, overflowing with booze. Everyone is there, celebrating. School’s out. Forever. Freak. It’s not just the bench of course – it’s Emily, on Tommo’s knee, her arm swung around his neck, as if intimacy is nothing more than the punch bowl on the table between them.

Al starts downing the punch, vodka and tequila mostly, sweetened with pineapple juice.
and orange fizz. He can’t walk away while she’s sitting there on Tommo’s knee, and if he’s going to watch, he will drink and be drunk, watching. Everyone’s mashed. He fits right in.

He sits directly opposite Emily. Her right knee lolls outwards so he can see her undies, black and silky, his favourite ones, and her thighs. He was with those thighs when they were awkward and desperate, like a child with a mother who doesn’t tolerate touching.

Al guzzles punch until he’s desperate to piss. He staggers upstairs to the ensuite bathroom, for the quiet. He can’t aim properly and he makes a mess of things. He tries to clean up with the shaggy blue bathmat. It’s all too much, the bending and standing, the shag pile blue against the smooth grey tiles, incompatible textures, the chirpy blue.

He vomits until there’s no more vomit. He retches, then, and cries. Peristalsis, he whispers. It’s okay, he slurs, slippery words. A normal physiological reaction, under the circumstances. He sits on the floor, resting his head against the tiled wall, cool porcelain against his cheek like a smooth river rock. He closes his eyes and yesterday is now, in the touching gully …

He hears Tommo laughing. He hears him say: What about Al?

Al stands. He peers through the crack in the sliding door. They are standing against the wall, diagonally opposite, Emily’s hand in Tommo’s jeans.

She says: What ABOUT Al? She is talking in her sex voice and he is drawn in for a second until his eyes and ears start to work together. Her voice. Tommo’s stiff.

Al’s a dippy, dippy downer, she laughs. A dud root, she adds, working the hand.

Al watches on and he knows, with a glinting certainty, that he’s not luminous. The knowing is wedged firmly under his gullet. Wallowing in her luminosity, he had forgotten about the energy lines, reciprocity and magnetism and not so much. The shady hollows.

Al opens the sliding door, startling them like crunching leaves. He enters the dim room like he’s taking centre stage, under a luminous spotlight. The moon is black, he says, addressing Emily. He articulates his words precisely, edging towards sober, only slightly giddy. He lays the stresses like he’s been practicing his lines for weeks. The moon has an atmosphere but it’s too thin to breathe. He is encouraged by the steady rhythm of his voice. Although the moon appears to be bright, its surface is actually dark, like worn asphalt, turning the sun’s rays silvery white.

What the hell? Emily’s hand is still now but it remains there, in Tommo’s jeans.

Holmium, he says. He doesn’t yell. He has no oxygen for yelling.

Holmium – chemical symbol Ho – phonetically slang for slut.

Emily withdraws her hand, leaving Tommo wide open.
Holmium is a rare earth element, soft and silvery white. Holmium has the strongest magnetic properties of any element. Only dysprosium comes close.

Think I’ll go and get a drink, says Tommo, trying to zip up.

Al continues, crying quietly but maintaining control. His voice is strong and sharp and holds its shape. Trivalent holmium ions have fluorescent properties, he says, focusing on Tommo’s hands, the small flashes of light from the zipper.

Tommo and Emily snatch a glance. Tommo laughs briefly, shaking his head and blowing air like he’s blowing cigarette smoke. Tommo turns to Emily. See you downstairs?

Al marches to the door, determined to be the first out. It’s not potassium, he mumbles in a hollow whisper, brushing Emily’s shoulder as he passes.

On the way home he swears. That’s all he knows to do.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Yesterday is so close he can smell its luminosity.

Sarah is leaving him.

It is to be expected but Al does not expect it. He calls his wife a Ho.

He doesn’t raise his voice. He says: Ho. Holmium. Chemical symbol Ho. Phonetically slang for slut.

He sits in the leather chair, rubbing his fingers over the silver studs – Grey. Oxidised.

He is seated and Sarah is standing. He is completely still but for the hands. There’s plenty of air to breathe but he tastes toxins. Conscious, fully cognisant, he is rigid – eyes alive and gone, alert and glassy, like a dead fish.

She says: I’m sorry Al. She cries: You don’t NEED people.

You cannot abide me, he says steadily.

Abide. It’s not about – abiding. It’s ...

The silvery white. Yes, he says. It’s not so much.
Research statement

Research background
When Jared Diamond asked acclaimed evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr why Aristotle didn’t come up with the theory of evolution, Mays answered frage stellen or ‘a way of asking questions’ (ABC 2013). The idea that a particular way-of-asking might generate a particular way-of-knowing is applicable to the practice of creative writing. Modjeska unpacks the concept of ‘temporising’ (2002: 75), inviting us to consider the generative possibilities of the temporising space – as an imaginative space for writers – a way of asking questions.

Research contribution
This work enacts the concept of temporising at the level of form and content, interrogating the connection between language and imagery, and the work of association and similarity and, following Aristotle, recognises the temporising space as a metaphorical playground. This method of asking questions involves alogical processes of association: supporting Freud’s ‘reciprocal relations’ between dissimilars (1900: 404) and Froeschels’ observation that ‘the subconscious [mind] considers similarity identical with identity’ (qtd. in Mavromatis 1987: 178).

Research significance
This work uses Modjeska’s analysis, and theories of subconscious processes of association, to enact an inquiry in the performative narrative space of the short story. It has been longlisted for the Australian Book Review’s Elizabeth Jolley Prize (2014) and the Séan Ó Faoláin International Short Story Competition (Ireland) (2015), and was also a finalist in the Glimmer Train International Fiction Open Contest (USA) (2015).

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