Chapter two

Sketching Subjectivities

Susanne Gannon

I am hesitant to begin this writing, for many reasons. Most mundanely it is too late to begin, although perhaps it is too late to stop. I circle around and around because it is difficult to know where to start.

So I started in my first version of this chapter with the academic argument, which is part of what I wanted to do as I worked around the problematic of the self—of subjectivity—in autoethnography. As I return to the chapter for a revised edition, I find myself circling again, circling around this text, realising that it is already what it needs to be, that it does the work it needs to do for me—the author and subject being written into existence, as much as I am writing myself into existence, by associations, relations, other texts and affects which swirl around. For in autoethnography, the text is also always a text of the self, and for the self as audience, as well as others who I hope may find a point of resonance. That is, I hope it might be a text for you too. The ethical warrant for this chapter is about its potential to evoke affect, “if it can help others,” my mother said, meaning “help” in ways that are about feelings, touching the feelings of another, how a text might move others intimately from a distance. These were ideas I was working out in the writing, and therefore I will let that working show, as it did in its first version. I have woven in some references to later texts where I have continued to explore these issues, but otherwise, this chapter stands mostly as it was when I wrote it.

In this text I explore the creation of autoethnographic selves and subjectivities, and the construction of self in the field, on the page and on the various “stages” of the world, and how we might trouble or critique the “I” in autoethnographic work. In particular, I want to argue for a relational autoethnographic subjectivity, a self that is contingent on the recognition of others and a self who finds voice through that relation. This is not fixed but rather a moment-to-moment, negotiated, responsive location. The distinction I make between “self” and “subjectivity” draws attention to the constructedness of the voice inside any text, including those that are written in the first-person grammatical voice. The self that I lay claim to with “I” or “me” gives the impression of a stable, coherent and bounded humanist individual; however, the poststructurally inflected term “subjectivity” draws attention to the contingencies of identity and multiplicity of discourses through which we come to recognise ourselves as particular beings. Recent insights from new materialist approaches to research and writing have posed new challenges, requiring autoethnographers to think beyond the stubbornly human dimensions of subjectivity. For example, what happens when we consider ephemeral elements like weather (Gannon, 2016) or our more-than-human relations with animal others (Gannon, 2018a) to be part of the unfinished relational processes entailed in subject formation? How might the materiality of texts, beyond the discourses that we might look for within them and around them, and the memories they evoke, impact on subjectivities and relations (Gannon, 2017)?

The questions that are of perennial interest to me as a critical autoethnographer are: How might a self be materialised or made possible in a text? What are the ethical and material and methodological consequences of the textual choices we make as autoethnographers, and what assumptions lie behind these consequences? What might be entailed in shifting from self to subjectivity? What are the relations negotiated from moment to moment within which the speaking self comes into being? Where are the “others” in our ethnographic texts, besides the subject, and beyond the human? In particular, I’m interested
in textual work and the performances of subjectivity that might be possible in autoethnography.

My suggestion that the textual self is a performance draws attention to the artfulness of ethnographic writing that is responsive and oriented towards the evocation of emotion and the opening of flows of affect. Such texts invite multiple points of connection and recognise the movements of attraction, repulsion and compulsion between writers, readers and texts. I want to write around and about and through autoethnography in this chapter and the shifts in register and authorial voice. The first section of the chapter surveys theoretical ideas that might be useful for thinking about autoethnographic writing within and beyond a poststructural paradigm, in particular the notion of a textual call and response as a way of attending to the relational conditions of autoethnography. The second section of the chapter offers fragments of autoethnography written in response to texts about the loss of a beloved brother (Ellis, 2009a, 2009b). Excerpts of this autoethnography are offered throughout the earlier sections of the chapter. This is a jagged, stuttering sort of writing that starts again and again, and slips away, interrupting itself and finding no place to settle into a credible version of truth. Traces of material artefacts, including photographs, letters and government reports, jostle against memories and imaginings. It suggests but does not resolve the possibilities of alternative accounts, and although it situates an authorial subject with a strong voice at the centre of the text, it also tries to destabilise what might be known. It is in part a writing back, responsive to the call of another sister who writes of the loss of a brother, and it is in part the expression of a desiring machine collapsing together thought and affect, self and other, reality and memory.

**SITUATEDNESS OF SELF WRITING/ SITUATEDNESS OF WRITING**

I keep approaching this aslant, and again in the almost dark, almost midnight when things like this rush out. Until I read your paper, Carolyn, I didn’t know you had a brother too.

We do not speak from nowhere. Inevitably, always, we bring experiences and dispositions with us—personal, professional and disciplinary—to any text that we read and write, including autoethnography. We bring all of the relationships we have in the world onto the pages and with them come unconscious thoughts and desires that are difficult or impossible to articulate. There is no neutral space from which we read. As well as our past experiences, we bring our present locations, and the immanence of futures that are opaque and, that offer multiple possibilities. Past experiences shift in and out of focus as we write them, reshaping their contours and significance as we write into them at different writing moments, in different moods and from different lines of sight (Gannon, 2002). We write ourselves into being as we write our texts, but not in a naive or innocent manner. Instead, we write ourselves into particular subject positions within the texts we write and, in unpredictable ways, we call others into relation—both inside the text and in their readings of our texts.

This is not to set the situated and subjective qualities of autoethnographic writing against the claims to objectivity of other modes of writing. Rather, the objectivity that much social science espouses can be best understood as a posture taken up within a text, with a set of rhetorical conventions that entail suppression and elision of detail in a desire to appear neutral and objective (Ellis, 2009b; Richardson, 1990, 1997). However, writing autoethnography is more complex than merely inserting details that are otherwise suppressed—details such as first-person point of view, embodied details of time and space, distinctiveness of voice, and affective and embodied registers—into writing that strives towards objectivity. These details carry ethical consequences, and responsibilities, in terms of the textual performance of the self and other in, and around, any text. Nor do I suggest that autoethnography can be achieved when the ethereal abstractions of texts that strive towards an illusion of “scientificity” are replaced by the esoteric abstractions of high cultural theory. I want to move closer to the details of things, to materiality whilst not foreclosing on meaning, by striving to keep the text—including the text of the self—open to multiple possible readings.

The text of the self is also, always, simultaneously overtly or not, a text that brings others into being too. At the same time as I want to respect the materiality of bodies, places and spaces in my autoethnographic writing, I also want to open other texts. Writing by others about their lived experiences brings me into new relationships with my own experiences, opens a sort of textual call and response, creates a mobile textual and material assemblage within which my self and others are always in circulation.

She says I should write what I need to write. It’s my story, too, she says. It’s his, it’s hers, it’s ours, each time and for each person a little different as our trajectories and intersections shift.
The suggestion of “sketching” in the title of the chapter highlights the always tentative and unfinished quality of the autoethnographic project. The “sketch”—as “a hasty or undetailed drawing or painting often made as a preliminary study,” or as “a brief, slight or hasty delineation; a rapid or offhand presentation of the essential facts of anything,” or as “the first suggestive embodiment of an artist’s idea as expressed on canvas or on paper, or in the clay model, upon which his more finished performance is to be elaborated or built up”—draws attention to the always unfinished quality of autoethnography. There is no determinate, or definitive, autoethnographic representation of any event, experience, object or phenomenon—despite the “auto” implication that this might be a single person’s account of a lived experience. Rather, there is a project, an ongoing investigation, always subject to revision and retelling from another angle, via a different lens, within another set of relations, along a different line of sight with the concomitant impossibility of an ending, resolution, or “finished” performance (Ellis, 2009b; Gannon, 2002, 2006). Although the unfinished element signalled in the dictionary definition of sketching is crucial to autoethnography, I would not advocate a “hasty” or “undetailed” or “offhand” approach, and I am left wondering how “the essential facts of anything” might ever be reliably determined. The following section of the chapter reviews some of the philosophical work that underpins this approach to a critical autoethnography that tolerates, even encourages, uncertainty.

**SELF, SUBJECT, SUBJECTIVITY—POSTSTRUCTURAL APPROACHES TO SUBJECTIVITY**

You open me up unexpectedly, blindside me, sock me in the gut. You can’t predict what points of connection a reader might have inside a text, what might rise up demanding to be written.

The idea of narrative material rising up and demanding to be written suggests writers and readers who are not entirely in control. It suggests affective flows between subjects and texts. It implies a degree of instability in the reading and writing subject. In this section I survey some of the approaches to self and subjectivity of poststructural authors who I have found useful in my own struggles with writing the self. This is not a comprehensive overview but rather a more detailed reading of particular provocative ideas around the self and/in writing.

The subject is considered, within poststructural accounts of subjectivity, as an ongoing project—as shifting, contradictory, multiple, fragile, fragmented. Rather than the discrete humanist subject, the individual, poststructural approaches suggest subjects who are “co-implicated” with others and with the world, including other texts in the world (Gannon & Davies, 2012, p. 72; Gannon, 2017). In particular, poststructuralism drew attention to the self as a subject who is constituted in language, within and through discourses that are socially and culturally framed, and that are always in circulation not only within texts but in the multiple stages and pages of our lives (Davies & Gannon, 2011; Gannon & Davies, 2012). Recent theoretical moves have strengthened the imperative to know the self differently by focussing less on the individual self, separate from others and from place, and more on the self in relation to others, including non-human and earth others (Gannon, 2016, 2018a; Somerville, Davies, Power, Gannon, & Carteret, 2011). In contrast to humanist versions of identity that focus on the coherence of an individual rationalist subject—the subject who knows—poststructuralism proposes a subjectivity that is not the property of any one of us but that is precarious, always in process and reconstituted anew each time we speak or write within constantly shifting circuits of power and knowledge. This is a dynamic and continuous crafting of the self and of experience within particular historical and cultural conditions and within circulating textual and material assemblages. This position problematizes autoethnographic writing that revolves around the experiences and accounts of a singular knowing subject, the confident author of a particular text. Rather, the self produced in a text is always contingent, tentative, situated and relational (Gannon, 2006). However, paradoxically, at the same time as the subject is relationally, discursively and textually constituted, there is a singularity and uniqueness about each subject—that I will return to later in this chapter—that ought not to be foreclosed (Cavarero, 2000).

The concept of the subject comes initially from the Latin *subjectum*, meaning broadly “a ground, basis, or what exists independently” (Colebrook, 2004, p. 71). In modernity, Colebrook explains, the human subject came to be seen as fundamentally different from non-human beings, as it became recognised as the one who knows and is “the basis and centre of all inquiry” (p. 71). There is an impossible folding within the text that means there is “always a gap between the subject who speaks and the represented subject spoken about . . . the subject is not a thing so much as the process through which things are given, represented or synthesised” (p. 72). This is not meant to apply to
any specific “self” so much as to the broader assumption that human subjectivity produces the world and all within it as we know it. In autoethnography, the self that is constituted within the text and that is the subject of the text—regardless of the verifiability of detail or the claims of grammar—is inevitably an installation in the text, an artefact of textual practice and authorial choice. Limits exist as to what can be known in and through a text, and these limitations can be foregrounded in how we write. There is an impossibility and excess in language, an unpredictability and volatility, that, as Colebrook argues, warrants attention through “ironic writing” that “does not pretend to be [a] full and transparent representation” (p. 73). Even texts that are autoethnographic in their intent have their own momentum in language, exceeding intentionality, rationality and the particular contexts of production and reception. This is a performative mode of writing where aspects of style and form can draw attention to the ways that autoethnographic writing can never be enough and is always too much (Gannon, 2018b; Holman Jones, 2005; Spry, 2018). As well as fragmentation and multiplicity, the inadequacy of language might be suggested by movement away from an autoethnographic register of emotion and embodiment.

Autoethnography has at times been criticised for a relentless emotionality. According to Clough (2000), it can risk “melodramatic focus” on tragedy and forget the “unconscious and desire” (p. 16). In overcompensation for the excesses of objectivity in other modes of ethnographic writing, its subtext has been the production of an unproblematised subject identity for the author (p. 16). It is not the singularity of versions of events that are sometimes told in autoethnography that is in question but the confidence of a speaking voice that may be too full of self-identity, too knowing, too certain, too sure. Clough suggests that, after Derrida, we might query any “presumption of the unity of speech…of an inner presence, an inner voice, so that the subject, when it speaks, is presumed to speak its own voice, to speak its intention ad to express its inner being” (p. 17). Broadly, she argues for a shift in attention to the circulation of affect that exceeds the individual. Clough suggests that the truths of experience cannot be chronologically or rationally ordered when temporality is itself disjointed, and we are haunted by memories of times, places and events that “repeatedly pressure the subject with bodily effects” (p. 4). Rather, we might aspire to writing that is embodied, visceral and non-linear; that shows shifts in thought as they are happening to the writer; and that throws the writer “backward and forward to find the self that is turned into parts, turned around parts of a new assemblage” (p. 14). That new textual assemblage will detail memories, matter, subjectivities, technologies, blank spaces and hesitations that exceed and disrupt the rhetorical intentions and the capacities of the writer.

Poststructuralist philosophers have much to say about the self in writing, and they demonstrate textual strategies that are of interest for autoethnographers. Derrida argues for a re-situating of the subject that entails moving from the assumption of an essentialised and unified identity that has substance independent of language towards an understanding of the subject as inscribed in language. He stresses that the concept of the subject need not be “dispensed with,” rather that it should be “deconstructed.” The precise strategy of deconstruction that he advocates means more than just unpacking the assumptions embedded in language or discourse. Rather, it means finding points of contradiction and hierarchies of meaning and pressing at these points and hierarchies until they are at the point of collapse. As Derrida (cited in Kearney, 1995) states:

To deconstruct the subject does not mean to deny its existence. There are subjects “operations” or “effects” (effets) of subjectivity. This is an incontrovertible fact. To acknowledge this does not mean, however, that the subject is what it says it is. The subject is not some meta-linguistic substance or identity; some pure cogito of self-presence; it is always inscribed in language.

(p. 125)

Thus, he argues that the subject must always be precisely situated in its multiple contexts including the text itself.

If we follow Derrida, insisting simultaneously that the subject exists and also that it is inscribed in language, if we recognise that the subject speaks and that it is not “what it says it is,” and if we direct our endeavours to “situating” the subject, while maintaining suspicion about the transparency of language, then autoethnography might seem to be impossible (Gannon, 2006). Or it might invite the sort of seriously playful textual deconstruction that attempts
to problematise the self in writing while at the same time performing a textual and relational self—even through evasion and aside. As Colebrook (2008) notes, Derrida attends to seemingly irrelevant textual details, such as metaphor, example, excuse, misquotation or sounds, but he makes little mention of biography...a claim to truth takes place in a body of signs that it at once displaces but also fails to master.

(p. 117)

Derrida’s collaboration with feminist literary scholar Hélène Cixous (Cixous & Derrida, 2001) operates as a sort of call and response, and provides an interesting provocation to autoethnographic writing. The book contains two essays. The first essay, “Savoir,” by Cixous, is a personal reflection on her myopia as a veiling from the world. The second essay, by Derrida, is called “A Silkworm of One’s Own” and is a direct response to the first essay. This essay, by Derrida, is described as offering “points of view stitched on the other veil” (p. 17). Both texts give tantalising glimpses of approaches to self-writing through which the worldly subject—that is, Jacques or Hélène—slips away almost as fast as they are sighted. Whilst they are relationally inscribed, they retain a certain singularity and uniqueness (Cavarero, 2000). The details are precise and inclined to the poetic. Place and time are written explicitly and elusively. Derrida is in Buenos Aires on a certain day in November 1995, and he is writing “from the lower corner of the map, right at the bottom of the world”; he is in sight of Tierra del Fuego, he says, and at the same time he is in sight of Magellan’s caravels (Cixous & Derrida, 2001, p. 24). He says he is a boy with a prayer shawl, a tallith, inherited from his Moses, his maternal grandfather, which was left in El Biar with his father and finally brought from Algeria to France at the time of “the exodus” (p. 44), and at the same time he is a man writing in the present, writing his own text in response to the text written by Cixous. The second essay ends with a detailed memory of Derrida as a child with silkworms. In this moment of memory the man closing his eyes in a bed in São Paulo in December experiences a “lapse in time” (p. 92). He lets himself “be invaded, as they say, gently, in gentleness, by a childhood memory, a true childhood memory, the opposite of a dream, and here [he says] I embroider no longer” (p. 87).

Both essays utilise material objects and biographical fragments, with the allure of truth about them, as flights into thoughts and as provocations for reflection on ethics and philosophy, rather than as the subjects of the text itself. Although they provide opportunities for textual “embroidery,” for displacement of the self as the subject of the text, or perhaps the self as the dominant voice of the text, this sideways treatment does not deny or undermine the credibility of the details of lived experience that are included. The deconstructive moves in the text do not deny the existence of a subject, nor do they remove the capacity of that subject to speak about themselves, though they do work against singular or authoritarian claims to knowledge. Most importantly, they respond, each text to the other. Colebrook (2008) describes these dialogues as more literary in style than the combative style of philosophical discourse, as like “love letters” between the texts (p. 7). Cixous takes up the dialogue again in her later essay, “The Flying Manuscript” (2006), wherein she says of Derrida “you have always staged the entry of voices into your interior scene pushing the interior to declare and show itself” (p. 15). Neither Cixous nor Derrida labelled their writing “autoethnographic”—they may well have been entirely unaware of methodological debates in the Anglophone social sciences—but the strategies they use are provocative and offer potential to autoethnographers to push their work in new directions. Although autoethnographers have written about literary form and the responsiveness of autoethnography to the “other,” there have thus far been few examples of dialogic autoethnography. Direct address to another inside the text, the back and forth of call and response, the collapse of the singular self inside the text, and the use of literary tropes and material referents thus open new possibilities for autoethnography.

The trope of writing “between the two” has also been taken up by Wyatt, Gale and others including myself (Gale & Wyatt, 2009; Wyatt & Gale, 2011; Wyatt, Gale, Gannon, & Davies, 2011; Wyatt et al., 2014; Wyatt, Davies, Gale, & Gannon, 2018) in “nomadic” inquiries into writing and subjectivity. Influenced by the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Wyatt and Gale (2011) generate a dialogic mode of writing characterised by movements, intensities and flows that envisage the subject as always part of “the assemblage, of which—with others, matter, time and space—we are a part” (p. 494). The text of the self becomes an occasion of folding and unfolding selves, tracing selves as continuous becomings in relation. This is not a version of a self that is abstracted from time or space, or that is untethered from the materiality of bodies and lived experiences, but rather a version of a self that is provisional and intensely responsive. Collaborative writing practices are alert to, and try to instantiate within the
text, the “haecceity” or “just this-ness” of the particular moment.

Deleuze and Guattari (2004) describe haecceities as assemblages incorporating bodies located at the intersections of not only longitude and latitude but also “climate, wind, season, hour”; they argue that these elements are “not of another nature than the things, animals or people that populate them, follow them, sleep and awaken within them . . . Forms and subjects are not of that world” (p. 290). Rather, they suggest we are all distributed in a “variable fashion” and we align temporarily along “dimensions of multiplicities” on an immanent plane of possibilities (p. 290). The self does not come into being only through the material and sensory dimensions of particular spaces and times but also through ineffable elements including imagination and memory that are always in circulation within and amongst subjects. As Wyatt ponders,

my “subjectivity” lies beyond the physical boundaries of my body, that I am bound and beholden to, connected and complicit with, amongst others [It includes]: the page onto which I’m writing on a pale autumn Wednesday afternoon; the wooden shelf on which my forearms are resting; the wonderful, inviting smell of coffee; the two young women baristas and their machinery behind me; the cold air outside that, because I am sitting near the door, hits me as the mother and buggy come in; the man at the table next to me who is always here on Wednesdays, and who seems sad each time, an impression I gain, perhaps mistakenly, simply by how he moves; the images I have of each of you as I write, my pictures of what you look like and where you live, and the lives you lead. (Wyatt et al., 2011, p. 36)

This mode of writing the self—even as it yearns towards particular others who write their own autoethnographic fragments (or “love letters” in Colebrook’s terms) in response—is informed and shaped by conventions of both literary writing and philosophy.

The influence of Deleuze also draws attention to the movements of affect in autoethnographic writing and their impact on porous subjectivities. Rather than feelings or emotions, affects are “becomings that spill over beyond whoever lives through them, thereby becoming someone else” (Deleuze, 1995, p. 137). This spilling over and becoming something “other” occurs between people and texts, and affect “contagion” can be provoked by powerful, evocative and engaging writing. Probyn (2010) describes how affects are neither internal to the discrete or bounded body nor externally imposed on that body, but bodies themselves are defined by “dynamic relations”—“thousands of bits all whizzing around” and in dynamic relation with all sorts of other bodies, including texts we read and write which are “integral to our capacities to affect and to be affected” (p. 77). They operate as “relays that connect word, gesture, memory, sound, rhythm, mobility, image, and thinking” (Connolly, cited in Probyn, 2010, p. 77). They promote the movement of affect within and between subjects.

Thus, for autoethnographic writing to be evocative, it must move the reader—affectively, aesthetically, rationally—as well as the writer, and the text itself will move in unpredictable ways. This is well recognised by autoethnographers who argue for evocative and emotional texts (e.g., Ellis, 2004, 2009b). Probyn (2010) talks about “honesty” in writing as being contingent on a combination of passion and precision in language and on awareness of the potential reader. The goal of writing is connection between reader and writer such that “the affects of writing can penetrate the body of the reader and the writer” (p. 82). Strong affect, such as that evoked in powerfully evocative autoethnographic writing, “radically disturbs different relations of proximity: to ourselves, bodies, parts” (p. 86). Writing is dialogic in terms of the constant movement or flow of affect. Autoethnographic subjectivity is non-unitary and constituted in relation to other human and non-human subjects, spaces, times, surfaces and events, particularly the event of writing.

A final insight and a caveat to keep in mind in a more dialogic approach to autoethnography comes from the work of Adriana Cavarero (2000) on narratives and the self. She theorises a subject who is always already in constitutive relationships with others, and she sees the desire to be narrated by the other as a condition for recognition as human subjects. Despite this interdependence and despite the desire for recognition through narrative, Cavarero insists on the singularity of the narratable subject. Her project is to recover the uniqueness of the human subject and of her story—the “who” who is “concrete and insubstitutable” (p. 73)—without abandoning the insights into the contingency of subjectivity of poststructuralism. Even though my story yearns towards and responds to your story, even though there are points of irrevocable contact between our stories, there is no merger or collapse of one into the other, and there is no easy path to empathy. Cavarero argues that, despite similarities,
collective we. I do not dissolve both into a common identity, nor do I digest your tale in order to construct the meaning of mine. I recognize, on the contrary, that your uniqueness is exposed to my gaze and consists in an unrepeatable story whose tale you desire.

In the final section of this chapter, responding to another’s story of the loss of her brother with my own autoethnographic fragments, I cannot claim to know or to feel or to experience in the same register. My keening at the loss of my brother must be in a different key. My obligation is to work with the specificity of the story I have to tell as closely as I can and to articulate those ambivalences and uncertainties that arise as I write. Nevertheless, I do not claim that this autoethnography exemplifies all of the strategies of deconstructive writing that I have elaborated; rather, it is what I could write at this moment, in this space, with this knowledge and these materials—papers, photographs, conversations, the stuff of memory. As is the way with texts, affective flows between texts and between subjects writing and reading these texts—circling between Carolyn and Susanne and other readers beyond us—moving in unexpected directions, and I am moved beyond myself, and beyond my intentions.

CIRCLING LOSS

Dear Carolyn,

I am hesitant to begin this writing for many reasons. Most mundanely it is too late to begin, although perhaps it is too late to stop. I circle around and around also because it is difficult to know where to start. Then suddenly it is 11 pm on Friday night when I begin again, on the sofa, laptop on my knee, squashed behind the coffee table wishing that I could write this section in a rush right through the night but instead I know I’ll sleep on it again, circle around it in my dreams, and be back here again, fingers cramping, shoulders tense, wondering where to start. And there’ll be some time soon, too, when I will need to take the package from the government out again from the shelf under the coffee table where it has been for more than three years now as I have no other place where I can file away my brother.

***

I keep approaching this aslant, and again in the almost dark, almost midnight when things like this rush out. Until I read your paper I didn’t know you had a brother too. I don’t know how I missed this, or didn’t register or remember this from your earlier work. Where was I, I wonder, and what was I avoiding? Your mention of a brother who dies, late in your paper (2009a, p. 374), opens me up unexpectedly, blindsides me, socks me in the gut. You can’t predict what points of connection a reader might have inside a text, how that text might call to them, and what they might recall, what might rise up demanding to be written. Perhaps it is the brevity of your mention of his death, that I don’t yet know your brother’s name, when I read this paper, before I trace back through your other work, that means your story has such an impact on me, as I write the details of my loss into the space in your text.

***

It’s more than thirty years ago and you’re peering into the TV screen looking for your brother in the Potomac where his plane fell in the water, and it’s more than thirty years ago and I’m flying across a million miles of desert, switching from plane to plane to plane and train, going home to my small town, knowing that I’m already and always (and still) too late and too far away.

Mum and Dad sit vigil in another city by his broken fallen body, holding him to life, calling us as often as they can. Mum remembers talking about organ donations when he got his licence, almost a year ago when he turned 18. Yes, they say to the doctors, give life to someone else if you can, knowing such donation means turning off life support, not knowing it means staying away from home another day, or having to identify ‘a body’ so many times. Mum talks to me, on the phone when I get home. I feel like (I should be) the big sister, the eldest one. The grown up. I think she says some things she can’t say to the younger kids, or to Nanna. I feel like the conduit, the calmer, the one to decide what to say and how to say it. We’re all so frightened. He’s not going to make it, they say. His organs will fail, one by one, the doctors explain. He looks so calm and still and like himself, they say, despite the fall, despite bouncing off the bonnet of a car at the bottom, onto the bitumen. They don’t want to let him go.

Déjà vu. We’d just got through this with my other brother a few short years before. He hadn’t looked like himself for months, his head shaved and all stitched up again, his face and body all black stitches and bruises and skin off from the gravel that his body had skidded along. He’d already had the last rites from a priest when my parents made it in to that hospital and was in
a coma for three months. They thought for a time that he'd lost an eye, but he didn't, and he didn't die.

Until they sold the place, each time I turn the corner of the passageway upstairs I catch a glimpse of long limbs hanging off his little single bed, twisted round with sheets and falling every which way, his head half off the bed, mouth open, door open, light still on. So sound asleep and so at peace like only kids can be. He was a long and lanky golden boy. We didn't know he'd grow so tall. Where did that come from we wondered, and the lightness of his blue eyes. He was a placid little boy, happy to draw for a whole day, or to glue together tiny pieces of plastic to make model aeroplanes and boats. He was a dreamy sweet sort of a kid. He loved cats and bananas and the Beatles, who broke up about the time he started school.

***

We lived in the middle of nowhere too, like you. No mountains ringing us in but flat dry land stretching in every direction, salt-stunted mallee and acres of wheat, and a string of low grey lakes. In a good season, if the silo was full, my brothers would let themselves in at the top and leap down to moonwalk through the wheat. They'd bring pockets full away to chew like gum. The tallest buildings on our horizon were the silo and our place, the two storey red brick pub with agapanthus along the side and dusty casuarinas sighing out the back. The four or five houses, the football field, the railway platform were all more horizontal than vertical. We had a balcony upstairs where we'd watch electrical storms coming across the sky in summer or we'd check the speed of a rolling red dust storm coming from the west and rush to close the louvers and block the gaps beneath the doors.

How did this landlocked boy get from here into the Australian Navy? That we didn't know. Perhaps it was the enchantment of the toy model kits. Perhaps a recruitment officer visited our high school and one kid in the room paid attention. Perhaps it was the lure of Patrol Boat, an Australian TV show that started just before he signed up for the junior recruit program. He didn't make it through to see the second series. I could ask the same of all of us, all of us who peered beyond that low horizon and moved on to other lives and other places.

***

There's a photo mum sent me, of the two of us. Just one of just us. With five children that's unusual—or it was in those days when we paid one by one for every photo and waited for weeks for them to come back from the lab. I'm in blinding white, long white socks and sleeves, a white gauze veil falling over my shoulders from a circle of white fake flowers, like a sort of halo on my head. I know my nanna made the veil, perhaps the dress, and probably the little round collared blouse that my little brother wears under his buttoned up brown cardigan. I'm seven. He's three. My head is down, looking to the side, showing off my veil and the crown of my head for the camera. We're in front of my nanna's apple tree, in a larger town we left a few years later. My little brother looks straight at the camera. His cheeks are baby fat and the curls on his forehead would be damp, I know, from someone damping and combing them into place. He looks a little worried, his eyes creasing over a smile-for-the-camera sort of a smile. This is a big day. Mass, we used to go back then. Masses of people, parades of children in white, all the rituals of the first Holy Communion, all the fussing and fandangle. Four children to scrub up ready for the day. Although my body's turned away from him, his right hand is out towards me and I've got a big-sister-grasp on his wrist. I'm holding him in place.

Sometimes I think there was another version of this photo, one with all of us in the dappled light under the apples. There's a tiny flash of red on one edge, the dress my sister wore that day, and I imagine where my other brother would have been in that other photo in my mind. I think I see his figure in my memory, arms draped around his beloved floppy eared black spaniel. I wonder if I did this myself, if years ago I cropped the photo Mum had scanned and sent to me. If I forgot, in my desire to retrieve my hold, to magnify our point of contact, to emphasise the circle my hand makes around his, that I was not the only one who suffered the loss of a brother.

***

There was no memorial for my brother. There was only a funeral. His mates from the submarine came all the way into our little desert, his Commanding Officer. In uniform, they played the last post, draped the flag over his coffin, carried it to the hearse and into the ground. We never saw them again. They circled around our questions about the truth. They couldn't talk about the details. They weren't there. They knew nothing. The hard-edged stone in my gut that started then and stays, turns again each time I hear the last post played. My brother, white capped in his summer uniform, smiles still—a looser smile-for-the-camera smile than when he was three, a red spot on his teenage check for ever—from the frame on the windowsill in the kitchen in my
parents’ house. Although they can’t be seen here, I know he was wearing white trousers creased seven times for the seven seas, and black shoes shiny from a daily polishing with the brush I now have under my kitchen sink, his name written in his own hand on the back of it. This military issued shoe brush with his name printed on it is the only thing I have now of his, the only thing that his hand and mine have both held. In my mother’s kitchen, framed on her windowsill, he still smiles his eighteen-year-old smile at anyone who rinses a glass or washes a pot in the sink, anyone who might lift their eyes to glance into his, perhaps to ponder mortality and justice for a moment, before they lift their gaze across the top of the photo frame and down towards the lake.

***

In 2008, when I heard on the radio that the new Australian Federal Minister for Defence had made a formal apology to the parents of young people who had suicided in the armed forces in recent years, I wrote to say there were other families who had been waiting much longer for an explanation. I received a fat package of papers from the government in response a few months later. My parents also received a long overdue letter of condolence.

Some of these documents I’d seen before. An earlier, slimmer, sheaf of papers—extracted with great difficulty by our lawyers from theirs—had been locked in the safe in my parents’ house for decades. My parents had walked me in once, when they first got them, sat me down on their bed, left me there alone to read them, perhaps knowing that I would be calm and that I needed to know. Perhaps, at some point, they walked each of us in for our own personal confrontation with the story the Navy chose to tell us then about the death of my brother. We tend to circle around things when we can. I tell my mother when she visits that I want to write this piece about my brother, she says I should write what I need to write. It’s my story, too, she says. It’s his, it’s hers, it’s ours, each time and for each person a little different as our trajectories and intersections shift. And here, Carolyn, what comes up for me in reading your story of loss is another point of intersection, perhaps an invocation. This fat new package from Canberra enters into the assemblage telling me more than I want to know. I don’t remember what is new in this bundle but I read it again and again, over a long time, putting it down and taking it again when I can stand it.

The Minister noted that an in-house Board of Inquiry was held onsite at the Navy Barracks just three days after the fall from a fifth floor window of the accommodation block. It notes that my brother died “as a result of injuries sustained” and that blame “could not reasonably be attributed to any other person.” He notes that “it appears your family was not given access of the Board of Inquiry Report” and encloses a copy of the report, excluding “Annex E to Enclosure One, photographs of the scene, due to their potentially disturbing nature.” The Minister also details how legislation and policies governing Defence inquiries have drastically changed in the years since 1982. Inquiries are now held in public, he assures me, rather than secretly, and families are provided legal representation before the inquiry.

The report details times and numbers—for example “declared ‘Brain dead’ at 9:45” and “mechanical life support measures ceased at 16:00,” the licence plate number of the car his body fell onto “LWG859,” names and multiple accounts. And it builds an elaborate rationale as to why this young man had variously “dived,” “leapt,” “thrown himself,” “flown,” “jumped out” through a window after a scuffle in another sailor’s cabin and in the presence of three other sailors. The details of the rationale are not credible to us who had known him intimately all his life. Comments such as “Difficulties were experienced in finding details of the next-of-kin of the deceased” are inexplicable.

The 55 pages of transcripts of interviews include graphic detail of how the medics managed the body, which clothes were cut off and in what order, details of visible and likely injuries, and details of all the running about, confusion, reported conversations and order of events on the ground. There are 10 pages of typed witness accounts to the Naval Police, taken on the night. There are 14 pages of drawings of the car park and the rooms with angles drawn, a scale for distances and a key to bloodstains and other pertinent details. There are two pages of ambulance records marking up injuries on a template drawing of a body and tick-boxing the various vital medical details of those injuries. In a sociological context, as well as a legal context, all of this might be fieldnotes, triangulating details in search of the truth. For me they offer complex testimony. I don’t read these notes often because each time there is a point (this time it is page 20 at the details of the hospital’s desperation to find next-of-kin) where my body starts to shake.

Amongst all the detail, what I look for as I read it again are the few sentences that bring me comfort. The duty officer who is quizzed on how many people were there and how quickly they appeared when he was trying to clear his passageways so he could breathe again says: “I can’t honestly say. I didn’t bother to count. I was just looking after the boy.” He says that they gently turned his body and supported his head while they
were waiting for the ambulance. They took his wallet from his back pocket and when “we found who he was we started trying to talk to him to see if he would come around at all.” I imagine that scene over and over as I want it to be. If I could I would be there, but I am reliant on these others. It’s a Fiesta of sorts, in my mind’s eye, lit by the street lights at the edge of the car park. I imagine it’s around midnight on a soft midwinter Sydney night, as quiet as it can ever be on a Saturday night in this part of the city. While people are running this way and that, panicking, and before the ambulance comes with all its lights and noise, I imagine there’s a small circle of stillness in the centre. In it there’s an older man, kneeling on the concrete, gently holding this young boy’s body in his arms, holding him in place, holding him to life, soothing him towards death, and saying his name softly in his ear—David. David. David.

Sincerely
(With love)

Susanne

NOTES

1. Initially the title “Sketching Subjectivities” was allocated by the editors, but the notion of the sketch became a useful figure to think through the post-humanist subject.

2. Definitions compiled from various dictionaries at Wordnik: <www.wordnik.com/words/sketch>

REFERENCES


