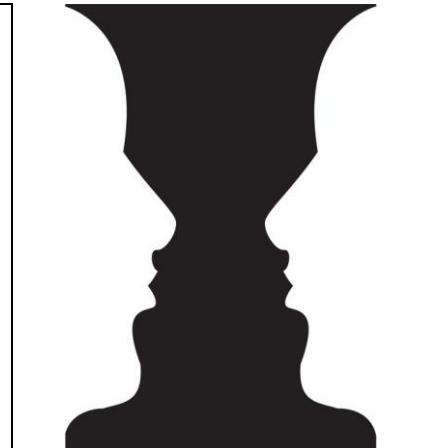


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## Flowerman

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### **Abstract**

*I am engaged in a project about reverie, using poetics and storytelling as my method. Where does one person's reverie start and another's end? What uses might anthropology have for reverie? Taking the form of a braided narrative, Flowerman, meshes my voice with others to explore the entanglements of reverie, its fundamental inter-subjectivity. But rather than call this autobiography or autoethnography, I regard it as a form of inter-subjective practice-led research, aimed at shared understanding. To speak of practice-led research is to evoke the precepts of artistic research as much as those of anthropology. Artistic research does not imagine a separation between knowledge production, and making processes. The insights yielded here through making, and reflection on making, are folded back into the practices of storytelling.*

### **Keywords**

*Reverie, practice-led research, creativity, poetics of space*

### **Introduction**

To tell, to make, to show is also to shape and to be shaped. To story is to approach anthropological form, not via the truths and fictions of representation, but through the politics and aesthetics of mutual becoming. In this conception of life, there is no transcendent vantage point from which to know. Storying forth as immanence – as knowing from within, from inside - goes beyond the binaries of culture and nature. For Stuart McLean, advocate of multiagentive forms of creativity, this amounts to “participating in the self-making of a world of which such stories are both a product and an integral part” (McLean, 2009: 223).

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The following text emerged in what Miller calls a “braided” form (Miller 2001: 16). Strands are twisted together to confound linear narrative. Braided narratives are characteristically “disjunctive, paratactic, segmented, sectioned” (Ibid). They reveal a tendency towards fragmentation “that invites the reader into those gaps, that emphasises the unknown rather than the already articulated known” (Ibid).

*Flowerman* trades in experiences of landscape and dream. Some sections work with first hand experiences, others draw on other peoples’ words, things encountered, observed, touched, and imagined. The question of who is speaking is not settled in a straightforward way; as in fiction, the “I” does not automatically signify autobiography; but neither does the use of the third person necessarily indicate a voice other than the author’s.

In a recent performance of his poem and video piece *Sea*, Stuart McLean spoke of allowing himself to be possessed by others – a de-centering of self in order to bring other voices to the fore. I am also interested in being possessed ‘otherwise’, and in the experience of being distributed through an environment in ways that can accompany experiences of reverie.

The following story then is a glimpse of a practice-led enquiry into what makes the possession by other voices possible as a method of writing and knowing. How can anthropologists learn to hear, write, sense and tell of things that shy away from apparently ‘rational’ modes of thought and sensing?

1.

Katherine gathers up her bags, ready to leave the train. It’s raining. Carefully, she picks her way around the gathering pools.

A flight of steps leads from the suburban London railway to the street below. Buses wait under the railway bridge in rows. She scans the shops looking for her childhood favourites: the ironmongers, with its wooden drawers, peeled gold lettering and creosote aroma; the art shop with its displays of oil pastels and sable hair brushes.

But they are missing.

2.

“But we came here to write,” says Joe, when I complain.

It’s New Year and we are in a rented cottage on the Llŷn, a jutting finger of land extending 30 miles into the Irish sea.

It is true that we agreed to separate distractions. But I am caught between the struggle to dream, and the unwanted dreams that threaten to engulf me.

In a book from the shelf in the sitting room I read that the Llŷn was used by pilgrims on their way to Bardsey Island in search of the road to heaven.

I too am searching for my own version of immortality. Not by supplication to the church, but to creativity, its promised increases.

This cottage (and my fantasy of it), is part of my method. In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard writes that the house shields the dreamer. The crog loft crouching over me is made for such protection.

3.

To the north is the estate where Katherine's mother grew up, built as part of a slum clearance programme in the 1930s. She went to visit it once when she was a teenager after persuading her mother, Enid, to drive round it on the way to somewhere.

Katherine conjures an image of her mother's childhood from scraps of information she's stored away, and things she's read in a book written in the 60s about the estate: the fields Enid ran across to meet Katherine's grandfather from the tube station after his commute home from work; the vegetables grown by her grandmother in the ample garden; beans with scarlet flowers and bushes draped with fruit.

A road name triggers another memory: her father in the front of his car, she and her brother in the back, legs stuck out in front of them. He winds down the window and pushes out his head,

"I've been up and down this road all morning like a bloody yo-yo!" he is shouting at the man in the oncoming car.

4.

While Joe writes, I spend two days dreaming. And fretting. At the end of the second day I write down the things I know: 1) I am engaged in a project about reverie. 2) I am using poetics as my method. 3) I want to know whether daydreams can be a form of knowledge, and, 4), a way of doing anthropology.

5.

Katherine walks to the bottom of the long steep hill. The road meanders past tidy front gardens, box rooms over hallways, a couple of stray Christmas trees by wheelie bins. Pausing in front of an open gate, she holds her breath.

When pushed, the gate dislodges some pebbles, grinds them across the concrete path. The knocker rises and falls of its own accord.

6.

Places where I have dreamt dwell inside me. But there is no straight line between memories and dreams. In a past I can't determine I am on a wooden slatted frame, being carried through a desert. The litter sways. Cot bars frame the sky. The Earth cries like a swarm of tiny flies. The landscape yields nothing but the pattern of my passage across it.

7.

Silence.

Katherine is about to leave when through the panes she sees a figure moving towards her. Even after so long, and through frosted glass she can see it is him.

The door opens, he stares at her, then stands back and motions, minimally, for her to come in.

She follows him to the kitchen at the far end of the passage. Her heart is beating faster. She wants to form words but can't, imagines them leaving her lips, dry, "I have something to tell you."

8.

When Joe goes running I meet a man on the hill behind the cottage. We get chatting and discover we have both been employed in art schools, he as a writing tutor.

"You must know" he says, zipping his jacket up against the New Year breeze, "how it drains you? Still, I'm retired now. The strange thing is how the first morning, of my 'new' life, I sat down at my desk—and after all those arid years, the writing simply poured out of me."

9.

Her father goes to the far end of the room and fills the kettle. Katherine pulls out a chair from the table; it makes a rasping noise on the tiled floor. He bends down, and opens the fridge door, swears under his breath, pulls out a bottle with only a dribble of white left in it,

The milk, he says. It's out at the front.

To be relieved of his presence, she goes back down the passage towards the front of the house; lifts the bottle from the doorstep, glances into the living room as she passes by. Above the fireplace, the painting looms large, though not as big as she remembers it.

Backtracking, she slips into the room, stands, then kneels by the unlit fire, placing the milk on the coffee table beside her. The effect of crouching down is immediate. She is a child, lying in front of the fire, drifting into sleep, the sounds of the TV in the background. The jester figure in the painting looks down at her, she can feel its eyes on her back.

10.

It's how our childhood landscapes shape us that I want to reach. How the childhood places of dreaming germinate new dreams. How the adults around children are shaped by their own childhood dreams. So that we are connected to generations by twisted skeins of reverie.

11.

The dark background sets off the Jester's brilliant appearance. One of his legs is raised, bent at the knee, toe tipped down. A small dog, described in thin lacings and dribbles of white paint, sits at his feet. The figure stares out, trickster-like, enigmatic.

Looking up at this figure, she suddenly remembers her dream of the previous night.

She is sitting up in bed having been woken by a noise. She knows someone has entered the house. Her bedroom door is wide open and through it she sees something on the stairs – a man, not wearing, but made of floral blooms. His eyes lock with hers and

in the mix of organic being and human being she registers a wild otherness she has never encountered before.

12.

I begin by trying to recall childhood reveries, mindful that as Bachelard suggests, the anthro-cosmologies of childhood might best be reached unencumbered by facts.

I surprise myself, never having written a fictional story before, how the characters say and do things I would not do and say.

13.

Katherine's reverie is broken by her father coming down the passage. He eases himself into the chair. Two cups sit precariously on his knee.

She puts them on the coffee table, and pours milk into his tea.

She points up at the picture.

- Mum never liked it.

- She never liked anything I liked.

She feels the heaviness of the room. The thick office-type furniture is his taste, not her mother's. Her mother's house is furnished with antiques: a line drawn between where she came from and where she aspired to be.

- I think of that painting when I think of this house. Last night I had a dream...

He grunts and raises the cup to his lips.

- So, you came to see the painting?

- I came to tell you that she's gone.

Her father hangs his head down.

14.

In particular I want to overcome what Bachelard calls our remorse at not having lived profoundly enough in an old house.

15.

Beyond him, through the window, the silver birch overshadows the back of the house. She remembers the texture and bend of its branches; the sweep of the lawn seen from up high, the field beyond the garden's end. She sees her shelters, made of rope and sheets, smells the stick fires, feels the texture of mud, the rise and fall of the swing's arc. Despite its suburban origins, she knows now, in a way she has never known before, how this suburban imaginary has fuelled her dreams. Rather than suppressing her longings for the earth, it has increased them – for every garden fence there is a corresponding wildness, for every unbounded terror, a poetics of space.

She looks at her father's stooped back, notices the shaking of his hands, the way he shuffles his feet round. Is it time to make peace?

She follows him to the kitchen and washes up the two cups and the spoon.

16.

I want to discover ways to relive suppressed impressions and what Bachelard calls the dreams that make us believe in happiness. To dream in this foreign-but-familiar house, in order to catch hold of the visions of my childhood home – and through these, to glimpse the daydreams of others.

17.

She stares out of the kitchen window at the garden that, as she comes to it now, was her savior. It is not her mother or her father who comes to mind but her mother's mother, whose stories survived her migration to London looking for work; stories that stitched together the dailiness of suburbia with the remnants of a childhood lived with animals and earth.

18.

Outside it is getting dark. As I close my laptop I think of the many things I try to explain, and how by doing so I risk robbing myself of my own difference. I think of the Flowerman's eyes, the strangest part of Katherine's dream - the most truthful part of the story.

19.

Now, looking out at the garden, Katherine recalls the rest of the dream. After locking eyes with the Flowerman, so other, so deeply unknowable, he turns and with the grace of a startled deer, disappears with a splash of colour, down the stairs.

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