
From Unwanted Memory to 'Palimtext' – A Creative Writing Process through a Series of Textual Iterations

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Abstract

In recent creative writing experiments, my intention has been to metamorphose source texts into entirely new texts. The source texts included carefully selected folkloric texts (which have an established tradition of being 'retold' and can't usually be traced back to one 'author') and also randomly selected novels, short story collections, non-fiction books, etc. obtained from thrift shops. I have recently used **speculative processes**: magical thinking, questioning, evoking empathy for objects, and **textual processes**: redaction of texts, faulty voice-to-text apps, folded books, and 'cut-up' text experiments. This article will focus on one of the recent **textual processes**.

Within these textual processes I have been working with texts as a physical object—the book, the print-out, the page. The source texts initially become fragmented which creates surprising juxtapositions, images, narratives, and ideas which are altered further during a series of iterations. Prior to the project described within this article, I judged any new piece of writing complete when I had written a new narrative in a more conventional literary form (e.g., a short story). However, for this project, due to traumatic memories emerging, the processes and outcomes became more fluid.

Keywords: creative writing, experimental writing processes, practice-based research, traumatic memory, cut-ups, palimtext

The creative writing processes I describe within this article are my own extensions of some of the 'cut-up' techniques developed by the writer William S. Burroughs, and the artist Brion Gysin. Their early collaborative cut-ups drew on previous experimental processes, such as Tristan Zara's *To Make a Dadaist Poem* (1920)¹ and could be described as 'collage'—applying artistic techniques to writing. Burroughs stated that 'a page of Rimbaud cut up and rearranged will give you quite new images—real Rimbaud images—but new ones'.² The obvious question which arises from this statement is that of authorship, but I was more concerned with the search for *new images* within textual sources.

When I first encountered Burroughs's and Gysin's cut-up process, I had been experimenting with redacting and folding other authors' texts. I had already discovered that these processes produced poetic phrases and unique imagery. Unlike Burroughs, I was not taking a deconstructive approach in order to reveal meanings within the source texts, but was using the source texts to restrict my choices of vocabulary, in much the same way as an artist might select a limited palette of colours to paint with. This restriction simultaneously resulted in an *extension* of my own vocabulary and imagery, as I encountered words I wouldn't habitually use. The choice of source texts was partially random, in that the books I obtained were on the verge of being thrown away. However, the vocabulary within them had to be sufficiently rich and varied in order to extract poetic phrases and unusual imagery, so in general, books written for children were excluded.

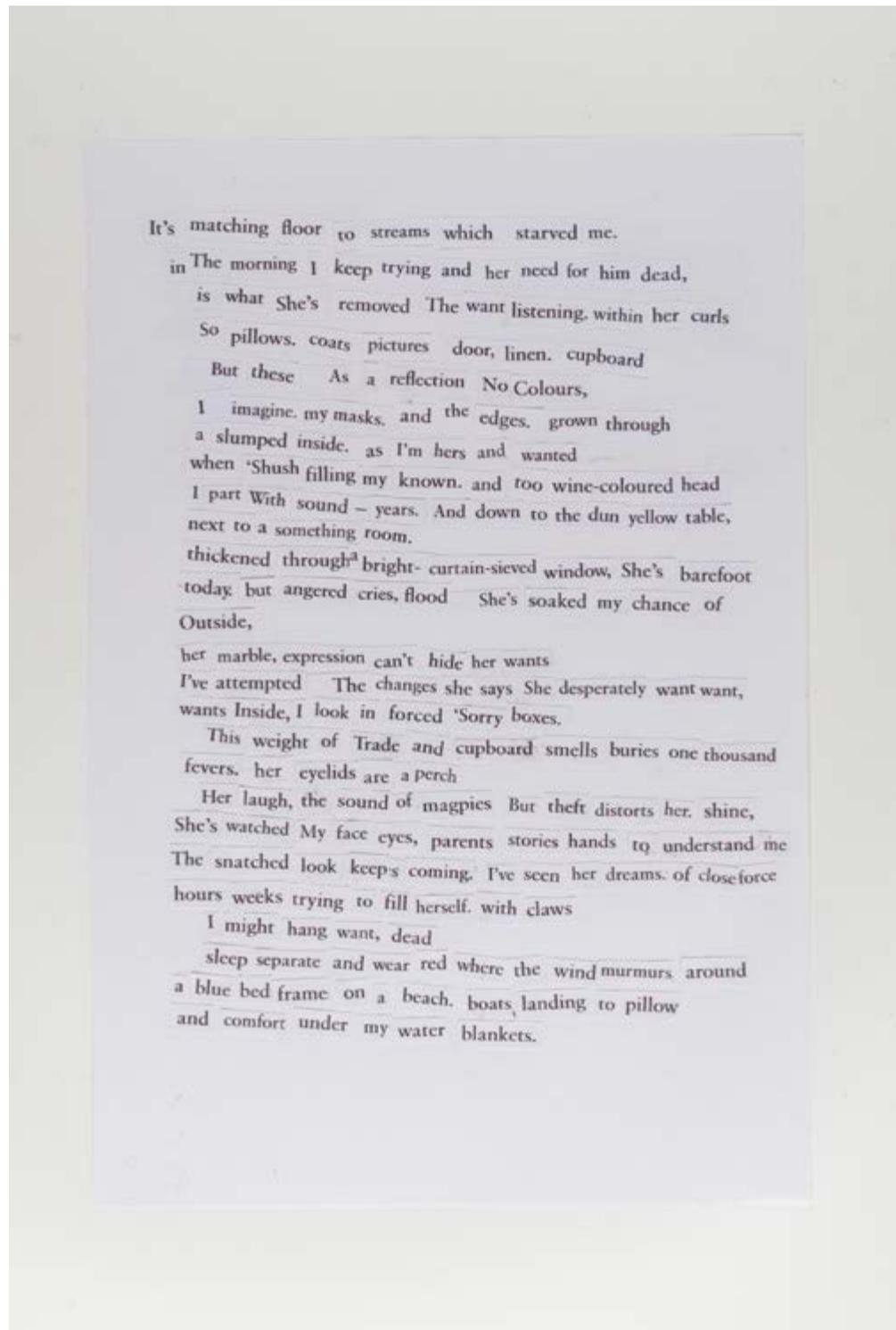
In a departure from working with other writers' texts, in the project I am about to describe, my intention was to explore what might happen if I used my own novels as source material for some cut-up experiments. Unlike my own novels, Burroughs's novel writing style was already fragmented, and though (in collaboration with other writers and artists) he produced many cut-up experimental texts, in his novels he inserted long chunks of more conventional narratives, as Burroughs concluded that 'you can't dispense with straight narrative if you want people to read it'.³ In embarking on this project, I had some initial concerns: would the familiarity I had with my own novels make it impossible to see the words objectively? Would any writing I could produce automatically have a self-conscious connection to the published novel? In order to detach the words from their context, unlike Burroughs and Gysin who often combined whole paragraphs, lines or columns, or novelist Kathy Acker, who 'used fragments of plagiarized text',⁴ I decided that my cut-ups would be formed by individual words.

The first textual iteration is shown in Figure 1. This cut-up text is made from words from page one of all three of my novels.⁵ The words were cut out individually, sorted into groups of nouns, adjectives, verbs, etc, and then were selected to form phrases which incorporated objects and the senses in order to produce new images.⁶ The first four lines loosely followed the sentence structure of the first sentence of my first novel, the second sentence of the second and the third sentence of the third. I then continued the emerging narrative with a focus on generating images.

As I held each word in tweezers and glued it down, it was like watching a bad dream forming on paper, as my repressed memories were contained within the

sentences. This one-page text shocked me. It was a description of the situation I was living in when I wrote each of the first three pages of my novels. They were written in a flat in Brighton, UK, in a long-term relationship that I now realise was emotionally abusive. The relationship had ended in August 2013 after fifteen years, and I left everything behind; possessions, jobs, friends and home.

Figure 1. *One Word Cut-Outs* from page 1 of my three novels. Photo: Jessica Chubb.



This was an unwanted memory. It was also not a memory I wanted to ever write about. But as this text was only *psychologically* linked to its sources, I believed I would somehow be able to use it to generate new writing. The biggest challenge in this instance would be to respect my emotional responses to the content, and work out how to adjust the stages of my process accordingly. The instructions I had intended to follow were these:

Cut-up Text:

1. Take a text that you wrote previously and cut it up.
2. (optional) Select other texts (your own or from other sources) to compliment or juxtapose with the content of the first text. Cut them up.
3. Construct an opening sentence from these words and continue. Once a narrative is emerging, make deliberate choices while considering the content of previous phrases.
4. Paste selections of words onto a sheet of paper, ensuring that the text, despite being fragmented, is readable.
5. (optional) Redact the pasted text using correction tape and masking tape.
6. Check for precision - remove any unnecessary words.
7. Type this text up and then handwrite it while expanding it into a longer, more conventional narrative which incorporates all the phrases from the cut-up text.
8. Type up the handwritten text, expanding the narrative further and removing any phrases which have become nonsensical or ambiguous.
9. Edit the text, checking style, logic, repetition, weasel words and making decisions about page layout which highlights poetic / striking / significant phrases.

Instead of sticking to these instructions I decided to pause, and do a freewriting session to see what emerged.⁷ My hope was that using just one phrase from the cut-up text would take the narrative in another direction in terms of content. Using the first line of Figure 1 as this prompt, I wrote rapidly, but the content of the narrative remained the same—I vividly recalled my home, relationship, and state of mind during the early months of 2013. As I wrote in present tense, I became immersed in the memory of the situation/place/time, and there came a point that I had to stop myself writing. Traumatic memory, according to Pierre Janet, 'occurs automatically in situations which are reminiscent of the original traumatic situation. These circumstances trigger the traumatic memory'.⁸

I'm aware that triggering traumatic memories can provoke debilitating and damaging responses. This particular memory was different to 'normal' memories which are fleeting and fragmented. Instead, it resembled other traumatic memories I've experienced during my life, in terms of its pace, intensity, and unfragmented nature. It was like being *inside* the memory—the memory's time was unfolding in real time. Within the text, I (as the narrator of the writing) was

simply lying in bed thinking. It was going to take as long to *write myself* out of bed (so the action within the narrative could begin) as it would have done to *get out of bed* in 'real' time, as 'traumatic memory takes too long . . .'.⁹

Writing from within this memory was therefore too immersive, and too slow. The freewritten text appears below exactly as it emerged, and has not been edited:

It's matching floor to streams which starves me. My search for open spaces, my longing for wildernesses and oceans. I hunt for them in this city, as well as in our home, but they are not here. So I imagine the floorboards as a stream, the street as river, the city as ocean. These walls are skies, with prints of angels and devils trapped in black frames against white paint. The bath is a pond, made complete with a plastic cartoon frog. Water pours out of its wide open mouth.

The flat we live in is on the ground floor within a row of terraced houses. We are lucky, our home is light, and has bay windows at the front, and a garden out the back. We have rented this place for thirteen out of our fifteen years together. Whenever I've been alone here, I have spent hours at the kitchen window, watching the fig tree in the neighbour's garden growing and shedding its massive leaves. Adam and Eve must never have been as naked as they were painted in all those oil paintings depicting their innocence and knowledge. Fig leaves can grow to be the size of pillow cases.

This morning I wake alone in our double bed, and hear her in the kitchen, cursing that last night's washing up is still in the sink. A few moments later, a catchy tune comes on the radio and I can hear from her footfall she's dancing as she sings along. The bedroom curtains are open, and as I roll over to face the view of a blue and white cloud-ridged sky, I imagine I am underwater. Then I fall from an aeroplane window and plummet into the ocean, close my eyes and drown.

I often drown. Sometimes I am run over by a car or a bus. Sometimes I climb the staircase of one of the tall hotels on the seafront, and step over the edge of a flat roof as if death is just a continuation of walking. The impact of the ground is always painless, as I die on the way down. Most frequently, I collapse from a sudden and painless heart attack and leave my body behind as I keep walking, watching for the ambulance that will pass me on its way to collect my body from the pavement. There are many ambulances in this city. They're reassuring as they pass me, as I know they'll take care of my body, and efficiently do what is needed to be done. For the past few years, my death happens in all these ways, and more violent ones. The knifings are painful, and sudden, but they are difficult to imagine as they require me to provoke someone to violence who habitually carries a knife. And how would I know how to provoke them? I provoke her all the time without meaning to, and each time I think that I know all the triggers to avoid, new ones appear. I die outside the flat, never inside it, because then she would have to deal with my body, and that would upset her. I die over and over again. Always while I am alone, and going somewhere or nowhere.

There are many ways to die in a city. I have imagined most of them. The flat contains only one way of dying. It is quick, and decisive. I have a suicide kit of stock-piled prescription medication that I no longer take, and a razor blade.

These things are taped to the underside of my underwear and sock drawer, the one place she'll never search while I'm out. If it was urgent, I would take the kit with me, and leave. And as long as she didn't follow me, I would walk and keep walking through the city and beyond it. I'd try to find somewhere that no one else would go. Somewhere isolated. A moor. A mountain. A stolen rowboat, so I could place myself adrift.

I don't keep a diary any more. I don't have any evidence of the past, of the time before her. There are few secrets left in my head. She's discovered them over the years, seen them in my eyes and drawn them out of me with questions. But she doesn't yet know that I want to leave. And she doesn't know how many ways of leaving I've considered.

And at this point, I stopped writing. This memory was not only upsetting, but it was also a narrative I didn't want to write, because I could see no purpose in doing so. Other writers do find it valuable, and I have every respect for their motivations. As E. Ann Kaplan observes, victims of 'traumatic situations put their experiences in writing, I believe, for several reasons: to organize pain into a narrative that gives it shape for the purposes of self-understanding (working their trauma through), or with the aim of being heard, that is, constructing a witness where there was none before.¹⁰

Without having a personal desire for further understanding or a witness to this particular story, I was more driven to understand *how* the memory had been triggered. What, precisely, was the trigger? What had I done with the material—the tiny cut-out fragments of paper that might warrant this intrusion? Or was it something about the wooden table I was sitting at, the light through the window, the smell of glue mixing with the smell of coffee? Was it simply that the act of cutting up my own words reminded me of being silenced? There was *something* in that, but it was only a passing thought. I kept hunting, but couldn't trace the trigger to anywhere within this home I live in now, at this table beside windows filled with sunlight.

The trigger must therefore be within the words themselves. They were written at particular points in time. And once I had removed those words from their context of 'novels' this memory being triggered began to make sense. The choice of vocabulary, themes, images, and layers which formed the overall narratives originated from myself as the author. When I wrote all three of those first pages, I was living with my ex, in a flat in Brighton, though I left just after I'd started the third novel. So the word choices within all three of the first pages were indicative of the state of mind I was writing from, however unaware I was of this at the time.

Could I rearrange the words again, and make sure they spelled out nothing so personal? At this point I was fearful. I suspected that I should not use my own texts to work from. My main concern about embarking on any type of writing on this subject was that completing it could become impossible.

For two days, I couldn't think about writing anything else. I was also having bad dreams. Now that the memory had been raised as a subject to write about,

it would not go away. Kaplan quotes Janet, in order to explain how traumatic memory can linger:

The subject is often incapable of making the necessary narrative which we call memory regarding the event; and yet he remains confronted by a difficult situation in which he has not been able to play a satisfactory part, one to which his adaptation has been imperfect, so that he continues to make efforts at adaptation.¹¹

I could not abandon this half-written narrative until there was some form of completed text produced. But I could change direction. An 'effort at adaptation', perhaps. I didn't know where to go next until I dreamed about being physically trapped within tunnels, and woke thinking that sometimes going right to the *heart* of something is the only way to find an escape route.

The *heart* that I chose was a highly personal text from 2013—the last letter I'd written to my ex. It had been sent to her while I was away, at her request, via email. In my opinion, this letter was lengthy, sad, and honest, and contained many repetitions of the word *sorry* (for things I wouldn't apologise about now). My ex had clearly experienced it differently as it provoked an extreme response which instigated the process of the relationship ending. She also refused to read the letter more than once, and I often still wondered what she had seen which had triggered her rage.

I printed the letter out and cut it into lines, then fragments of phrases, and then even smaller phrases until the words were disconnected from their original context. I then selected two additional texts which incorporated what I had learnt about the relationship since it ended. It is perhaps significant to mention that I had some contact with Woman's Aid and was provided with information about domestic violence and emotional abuse. I was also given information about narcissistic partners and how to recognise this personality trait.

The texts selected for use within this next cut-up experiment were therefore:

The letter I wrote to my ex.

An online text about emotional abuse.¹²

An online story of Narcissus and Echo.¹³

I cut short phrases from these three sources and placed them in a grey straw hat, in an attempt to keep the selection process light-hearted. My intention was to randomly fill three small pages with linked and opposing phrases. After taking the first two phrases from the hat, I realised that I would need to be more flexible about where they began and ended, otherwise words such as 'and' might be next to 'but' etc. which would serve no function other than to confuse.

After reducing the length of the phrases still further, and pasting them onto the pages, the content seemed slightly too sparse. I added in a couple of phrases cut out of a book, which was selected because the font was a similar size.

I then covered the internal thoughts and what was 'unsaid' with translucent masking tape, so the words could still be seen, but not as clearly as the fully visible text. I completely blanked out any unnecessary words by using correction fluid.

The visual effect of these three pages was a collection of fragmented phrases. The conflict of silence vs speech was reinforced by the placing of the translucent tape.

Though it was emotionally challenging to re-read my own letter, once it had been cut into fragments, it lost its emotional force. I became far more interested in how to combine the selected texts together. In its simplest reading, this text shows a situation where a person with no voice finds their voice. The inclusion of a myth (carrying its own associations) added another layer, and the frank descriptions of emotional abuse again provided an additional layer. The combination of these texts were ambiguous due to the fractured appearance and fragmented content, and yet the links between them were fairly clear.

To develop a more conventional narrative from the three pages of cut-up writing, I wrote a short story called *Echo*. The setting of the story is the flat in Brighton, at around four months before I was finally capable of leaving the relationship. I created two 'characters' based on Echo, Narcissus, myself, and my ex. I added a slightly separate narrator in order to maintain emotional distance. This narrator also represented some of the positive effects I experience from having learned to dissociate, such as being able to invent elaborate and complex fictional worlds while writing novels. As Judith Herman observes, 'once [a survivor] is free, she may even learn to use her trance capability to enrich her present life, rather than to escape from it'.¹⁴

The presence of this narrator not only enabled me to maintain a slight distance from the content of the story, but also allowed the new text to develop into a hybrid of fictional and autobiographical writing. The short story incorporated phrases spoken by my ex which I had written down while we were still living together. I had jotted down these phrases because during our discussions I would often physically shake, and have problems recollecting what had been said. Over time, it became important to me to privately discover the exact words which triggered the shaking, so I could read them repeatedly till they lost their emotional force. The short story also shows me (or rather, 'Echo') gradually getting rid of my possessions, even before I was aware of the reasons why I was doing this.

I also included something safe from now, this present time. This would help me bring myself back if I got too immersed within the memory. I chose a seashell and invisible armour as key images—reminders of happiness in my current relationship. These were the keys which would unlock the way home.

Figure 2-4. *Unlove Letter*, page 1 to 3. Photo: Jessica Chubb.



Echo

The gas fire casts orange light across the floorboards. I am hidden inside a seashell Echo brought home from the seafront. The shell is curved and cracked, and it sits on the middle of the mantelpiece. I am a fragment of Echo's personality, and I have freed myself from her. Her partner, who describes himself as male though he has a female body, I have re-named Narcissus, though that is not his real name. While Echo is out at work, Narcissus spends many hours in this living room, gazing at the mirror. He dresses in suit jackets and frilly dresses. He sews new clothing for himself and alternates from subtle make-up to drag queen make-up to subtle make-up.

When Echo's here alone, she often runs her thumb over one of the cracks along my shell. At other times, she checks her hiding place behind the sofa is undisturbed.

They are not in this room tonight because they are in the kitchen. Narcissus is talking about being frustrated because though Echo can repeat certain words during an argument, she often forgets what she has agreed to.

Echo doesn't know I've left her body, and am living inside this shell. Without me, she is numb, but she was numb already. I detached myself from her during a particularly brutal conversation they were having about her mental health, and the effect of her 'acting out' her fear and depression. She'd retreated into silence again. And when I coiled out of her heart and hid myself inside this shell, she didn't even notice I'd gone.

This is a tiny ground floor flat. Narcissus keeps all the inner doors propped open, though Echo prefers them to be closed. I can hear her now, from the kitchen. She's repeating back to Narcissus that she is selfish, and that this argument that's been going on for nearly two hours is not Narcissus' fault. She asks if that's enough, and can they go to bed now, as she has to be up for work in the morning.

Echo comes in and switches the gas fire off. She's looking thinner. Her eyes are dark and partially hidden under her long red hair. She glances at the cushion-drowned sofa, and returns to the kitchen.

The clock on the bookshelf beside the window says that it is 3.00am. The oak tree that grows outside on the pavement is growing acorns. There's a magpie roosting in its branches, and I hope Echo didn't notice it. She can see sorrow in a solo magpie, and feel it immediately. I can't go outside with her, as when she's alone, walking to work, or during her lunchbreak, or coming home, her thoughts are so dark, so confused and frazzled that parts of her are falling away. I might easily get lost. She thinks she's going mad. She was on medication, but she's stopped taking it. She hasn't told anyone this. She never tells anyone anything when she's frightened. She waits till she's calm, and everything is resolved. But that's not yet. She keeps telling herself it will be soon.

Once, Narcissus was away for a whole month. Echo was quiet during this period of time, but on the weekends she danced to loud classical music. Melancholic violins and pianos and flutes. She visited the library and brought books home to read, and each evening and weekend I returned to her heart to see what she was reading. For the first week she, we, I . . . read books about nymphs and gods that

I found terrifying. During the second week, I read books of fairy tales written for adults where blood brothers and kings and she-wolves were frenzied creatures. In the third week I read about earthquakes and landslides, tsunamis and all kinds of natural catastrophes. The final week before Narcissus returned, I read a book about domestic violence, re-reading the chapter about emotional abuse. I returned these books to the library two days before Narcissus came back.

Some things, once read, can't be forgotten. I think Echo's biding her time.

As am I. I am collecting all the words which are spoken between them, into this shell.

It is 3.33am. Narcissus tells Echo that her family traumatise her, and that she's a nightmare to be with after she's visited them. Echo disagrees about this. After a while, she says sorry instead. She says it again. It is 3.55am. At 4.01am. Narcissus tells Echo that sorry is a non-word. At 4.04am. Narcissus tells Echo that the phrase 'I don't know' she constantly uses is deeply frustrating.

I can't hear anything Echo is saying.

Narcissus tells Echo that her friend Rose is not to be trusted, and he asks if they're having an emotional affair. It is 4.15am.

It is 4.31am as Echo says she doesn't understand what is meant by the term, 'an emotional affair', but whatever it is, she's sure she hasn't had enough time with Rose to have one.

Narcissus doesn't feel loved and recites the reasons to Echo.

Echo becomes sad, and agrees to help Narcissus. When she's asked to repeat some of the things she might do to help him, she's forgotten what they are immediately.

Narcissus shouts about how forgetful Echo is, and suggests that she writes herself a list.

They are both quiet for a long time.

At 5.33am Echo says she'd like things to go slowly for a bit. She asks if she can go to sleep yet.

Narcissus agrees they should both go to bed, and clicks the bathroom door shut. Taps run.

Echo comes into the living room with a rubbish bag, empties a small bin into it, and carries it outside to the pavement. When she comes back indoors, she sits on the sofa and waits.

The bathroom door clicks open.

Echo leaves the living room. In the hallway she tells Narcissus she has to brush her teeth but won't be long. Narcissus goes to their bedroom and gets into bed.

At 5.42am Echo goes to bed.

The alarm rings at 7.00am. Echo gets out of bed and switches it off. She goes back to bed and sleeps till 8.00am. At 8.21am she comes into the living room dressed in smart trousers and a blouse. Her hair is tied back and her face wears eyeshadow, lipstick, mascara. She glances out of the window. She puts on a raincoat and picks up her handbag. She pauses, listening.

She reaches behind the sofa and retrieves a large plastic bag. As she leaves for work at 8.25am, she quietly carries the bag outside and places it with the

neighbour's rubbish. She steps on a twig and the loud crack makes her jump.

Echo has been quietly throwing out her possessions every bin day for several months. There can't be that much left that belongs to her. Narcissus has been sewing each day for a long time, and is filling the flat with new fitted jackets, dresses, wide trousers and bolts of fabrics.

One evening Echo's alone, putting jumpers, books, and two vases into another rubbish bag. She picks my shell up, frowns, and places it in her handbag.

The following day in her office, Echo puts my shell on a small pile of copper paperclips. She watches it while she takes notes, types numbers and words, and answers the phone. At 1.00pm she places my shell in her coat pocket and goes outside for a break. She walks through busy streets. Tourists chatter in as many languages as the seagulls wail and she passes through them. Across a road. Down steps. Pebbles crunch under her feet along the seafront. At the edge of the waves she cups my shell in both hands, and places her ear to the rim.

I let Echo hear one of their arguments, from start to finish, so that she knows it's not both of them arguing at all. Only one voice is arguing, and the other is echoing.

One of Narcissus' questions is often repeated. 'Are you frightened of me, yes or no?' Echo's echo is always, 'no.'

I echo the words Narcissus has spoken to her, the ones she finds impossible to remember. She shakes her head as she hears that Narcissus doesn't know what empathy is. She also hears him say that kindness doesn't matter, but honesty does. She hears that shyness is weak, and silence is frightening. She hears that sex after an argument can be the best sex in the world. She hears that he thinks that break-up sex is even better. She hears about how much Narcissus loves her and she hears that this is why these conversations are so important. She hears Narcissus say that he doesn't want her be happy, or she won't work at their relationship.

Echo remembers when they first met, Narcissus said, 'I'm made of anger.' At the time, Echo didn't believe this was possible.

She takes my shell from her ear and looks at it for a long time. Then she holds it to her lips and whispers, 'what if . . . there is nothing wrong with me?'

She carries my shell to the edge of the sea, and hurls it away.

The shell spins through the air, I spiral out of it, spinning through sky, under sea, over sea, and rush back across the waves to her. As I rush into her heart and spread through her body, she breathes in sharply.

She places her hand on her chest. On our chest. My chest. And she knows, and we know that one day soon I will leave home in the morning, and won't ever go back. Not today. But perhaps tomorrow. Or tomorrow's tomorrow.

I stand here at the edge of the waves for a long time, inhaling the smells of salt and rotting fish, listening to the sounds of seagulls and watching the horizon line. The ocean reflects nothing but the sky above it. Inside my body, I can feel my heartbeat, and another, and another. It reverberates through my ribcage and there is a sensation of invisible armour spreading over my skin. It's made from broken seashells.

After writing this short story, I used the following process in order to produce another iteration of expressing this memory in a textual form. At that time, I believed it would be an appropriate conclusion of this process of working with the cut-up method and using my own texts. As the two source texts, I used a printout of the *Echo* short story and a small book containing the fairytale *Rapunzel*, which is about a woman who is trapped in a tower.

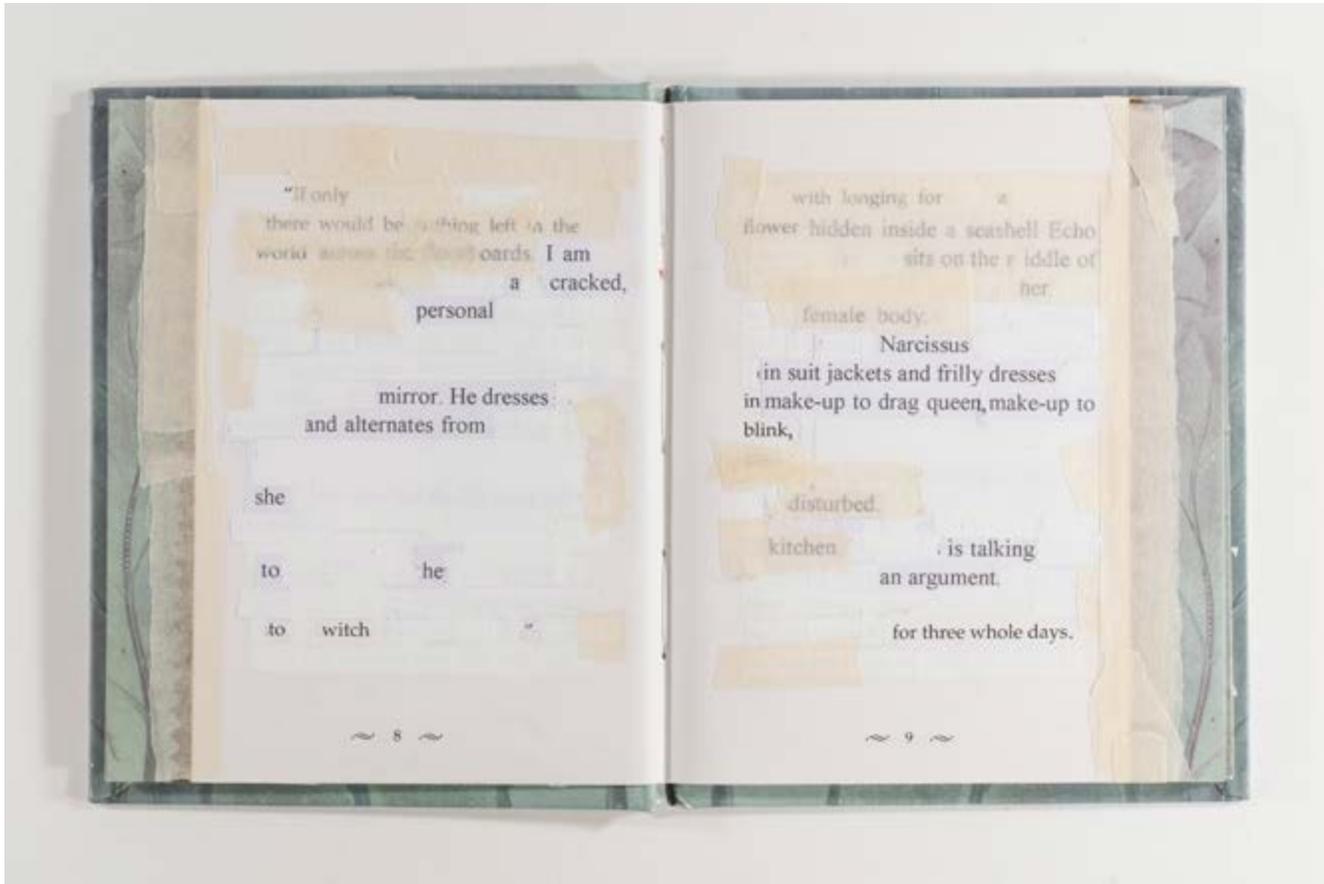
1. Select a book.
2. Count the pages.
3. Cut another text into oblongs, one for each page, using scissors and taking care not to slice through any words.
4. Place the first oblong on the first page, and the last oblong on the last page. Randomly place all the other oblongs on the other pages throughout the book.
5. Paste them onto the book pages, allowing some of the text which is already printed in the book to remain visible.
6. Select words to remain visible from the new combinations of words in each oblong.
7. Consider leaving characters/symbols/images visible within the book, but keep them minimal and precise.
8. Use correction tape to fully blank out words, and masking tape to obscure them.
9. Add in punctuation marks using a fine black pen.
10. Paste a new title onto the cover.

At first, this small book which was once a fairy tale seemed an appropriate end to this process. When I read through the new combinations of words within the book, I saw what I would describe as *a-fairytale-gone-wrong*. There are many ways of reading it, as (due to the fractured texts) the content is ambiguous, but this was my own interpretation.



ECHO













and down came the curtain
and up the witch
climbed.
with a rubbish bag, empties the tower,
she comes back indoors,

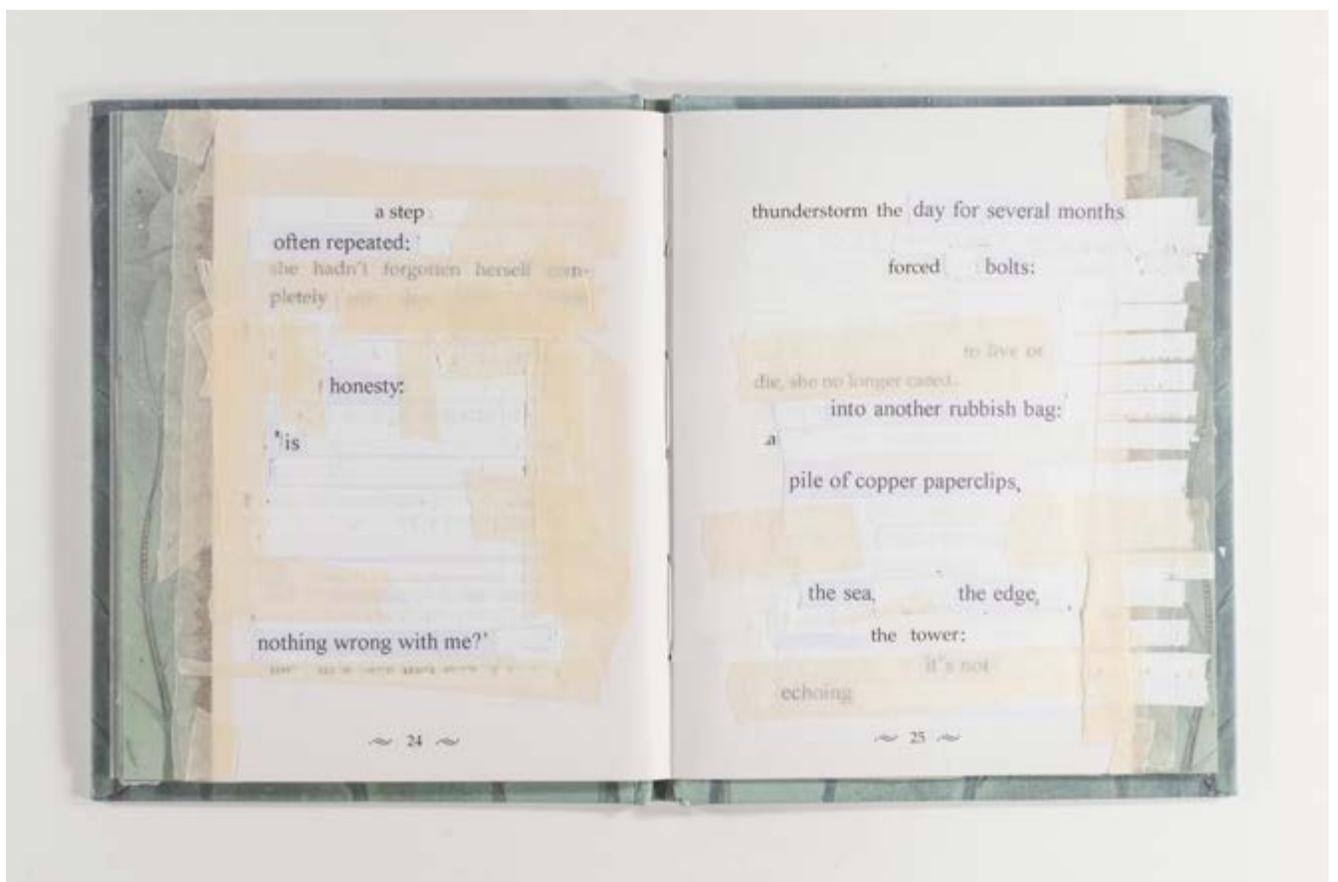
In the hallway she tells Narcissus:
their bed

gets out of bed,

jump.

frightened of me, yes or no?'

impossible to remember.
what empathy is. She hears
that shyness is weak, and silence
hears
how much Narcissus loves her.
She hears Narcissus say:
ship
made of anger. Echo
holds her lips





I made a silent video of my hands turning the pages of this book, and in editing the video, created a mirrored version and 'ghosted' it over the first version. This reflection visually implied Narcissus's obsession with his own reflection in the pond from the myth of Echo and Narcissus. The words became less legible as fragmented phrases were overlaid - semi-transparent and reversed - mimicking my own experience of feeling silenced, or incapable of speaking clearly. A link to the video can be found here:

<https://vimeo.com/306700855>

A few days passed, and yet the process didn't yet feel resolved. I couldn't stop thinking about how different my life was at the very start of writing my third novel¹⁵ (in an abusive relationship in Brighton, UK) to how it was by the end of writing it (in a happy relationship in Wellington, NZ).

I didn't want to keep working with my own texts for much longer, as I was concerned that if I did so, I would be in danger of becoming that circular snake, Ouroboros, which is popularly known as a symbol of 'wholeness' or 'infinity'. Personally, I've only ever been able to see it as a snake which is going around and around in a circle, eating its own tail for all eternity. But it struck me that the other thing about snakes is that they regularly have to shed their skin. I once watched one do this, and it was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen. The snake hid for several days, and I worried that it was dead. Then it shifted and worked its way out of its skin, which remained in one piece. The skin was like a rare translucent paper. The new snake which emerged was so alive that it moved like a dancer inside its small tank, its eyes gleaming like something set free. As a memento, I kept its shed skin as it no longer needed it. I stored it in an airtight glass jar, and when light shone through it, the traces of the snake's markings and scales were fully visible.

I decided to embark on one final iteration which used my own texts. In considering all the other texts I'd written whilst writing my third novel, I realised how many they were. Handwritten notebooks, drawings and diagrams, annotated printouts of chapters, the poems which aided the writing process, the freewriting sessions I'd done to develop the characters and plot, the Isolation Blog I'd published on my website, the short stories I'd written, and the plotlines and chapters that I had edited out of the novel's first draft before it was sent to my editor. Little of this material was on the pages of the published novel, though all of these other texts undoubtedly gave the novel more depth. Were these texts the skins that the novel had shed on the way to becoming fully itself? Or were they my own skins—the texts I'd had to write and discard, in order to write my novel into existence? I imagined all these texts handwritten all over the pages of a copy of my novel, but due to the sheer volume of words, the surface of each page would become unreadable.

According to Sarah Dillon, the term 'palimpsest' historically refers to how one text can overwrite another, with the first text becoming ghostly as the other text is imposed on the same surface.¹⁶ The two (or more) texts usually had no relationship to each other—palimpsests were created because velum was expensive and rare—so had to be reused. If I'd had to write and rub off and rewrite all of the texts and drafts

I produced while writing a novel onto one set of pages, the final version would have been filled with many ghostly layers. While the palimpsest's layerings are of *un-linked* texts, Dillon also briefly cited Michael Davidson's term *palimtext*:

Davidson coins the word 'palimtext' in order to combine 'post-Structuralism's emphasis on writing as trace, as inscription of absence' with 'the material fact of that trace, and inscribing and re-inscribing'. Davidson argues that 'the palimtext retains vestiges of prior writings out of which it emerges. Or more accurately, it is the still visible record of its responses to earlier writings'.¹⁷

In 1997, Davidson wrote that the 'palimtext' seemed 'decidedly low tech' in comparison to *hypertext*—and commented on its material qualities:

pencils, pens, paper, typewriters. . . . The personist character of these technologies is dependent on their ephemerality, their fatal involvement in time . . . staples rust, card stock fades, paper yellows and begins to flake. . . . The materiality of ephemerality is a study in ghosts.¹⁸

In response to this link to my own recent textual experiments—treating books/ existing texts as 'material' to be folded, redacted, and cut up (using 'low tech' masking/correction tape, pencils, pens, rulers, scissors etc.) Davidson's term *palimtext* seemed an appropriate description for some aspects of these processes. In fact many of my notebooks might be considered *palimtexts* already. They certainly contained layers of textual markings, crossings out, and revisions. However, what if a *palimtext* was made the other way around—starting with the end result (a published novel) and making it seem fragile or ephemeral, and then taking a discarded text (or layer) which was part of the stages of writing the novel, and making this text appear resilient?

Within the sections of my third novel which were edited out prior to submission were a series of nine 'Letters to Cupid.' These were written by the main character (Danu—a young female tightrope walker who is grieving for her parents). Danu had met a woman beside a river—an artist who was fishing with a bow and arrow. This woman left a lasting impression on Danu – so she wrote letters to her, nicknaming her Cupid. In these letters Danu struggled with her fear of love, and many of these letters incorporated my own struggles at the time of writing them, as I was learning to be able to trust and love someone again. Much later, after working collaboratively on a project¹⁹ with my new partner, who was also exploring themes of love and trust, I removed the character of the artist/ fisherwoman, and the Letters to Cupid had to go as well. This meant that the novel became a manageable length, and with the removal of this strand or layer, the central plot was simplified.

Pages 250–259. Figures 19–28.
City of Circles/Letters to Cupid.
Photos: Jessica Chubb.

I followed these instructions:

Reverse Palimtext:

1. Tear out the first or last page of each chapter within a published novel.
2. Select the same number of pages from texts which were edited out of the novel prior to publication.
3. Sandpaper the pages from the published novel until they partially disintegrate, leaving holes, tears and rips.
4. Place the edited-out texts behind each page and attach them together at the top with masking tape so the novel pages can be raised and the edited out texts can be read separately.
5. Glue down the parts of the novel pages that are torn and disintegrating so the edited-out text shows through the tears.
6. Place the sandpapered page-dust in a glass jar.

This making of a reverse 'palimtext' became the final textual iteration within this project. The process began with cutting up my novels and producing a text that described the circumstances I was living in while I wrote their first pages. I then cut up a letter to my ex and two other texts which expressed what I had learned since then. The next iteration was a short story that illuminated a shift in understanding. This story was then cut up to produce a fairytale-gone-wrong. And finally, I returned to the novel I'd been writing during and after leaving that relationship and revealed one of its discarded layers, while simultaneously exposing the fragility of its pages.

The series of textual iterations contained fragmented and more conventional writing styles, and their content originated from memories. The combination of these textual iterations thus express an emotional journey, sometimes fractured, sometimes clear and immersive. This journey began within the confusion experienced in an abusive relationship, travelled through the shocks of realisation and of leaving, through gaining understanding, and (via the Letters to Cupid) towards reconnection with the ability to love and trust again.

Now this project is complete, it is reassuring to me that the final ten pages show only surface damage. In half-light these pages resemble skin being peeled away, to reveal something intact.

ONE FOR SORROW

LETTERS TO CUPID

Dying faces
shine, as if they
ened itself, so
emotion, air
They flood
before the

Inside a
patterned
mother.
dead father
dead, onk about

Danu spent the past
alive through
forced water
sponged their
snatched homes
scare away the
The sound of their
she might have a
chance of recovery if she remained still.

The wine-coloured curtains are closed. Inside, the caravan is soaked in reds. Outside, the sun will be too bright for today.

Dear Cupid,

I met you, just once, as a human, as a woman now you're haunting me. I know everyone says from love, follow your heart, those things are soft. But I have run away from love. I ran away from loved me.

Are you really Cupid, grown angry with why you're here in my head?

Sometimes I think I've made a hole in the love is this invisible fabric which I've torn by always. Over and over again. I could have found love those beds I never slept in.

I could have found love with the man who I couldn't let myself. Love felt like a thing order me. Nothing to be trusted. Why is it that

of you, fisherwoman? You with your wings fish you look in the eye and then kill. You of the river to see what it is you are killing

or cloaks. Why not kill them with your everyone else kills what they his hunchback at them, when they

to him - alone with so. bright.

Danu can see all this well enough, but he never allows himself to be so mesmerized. Despite the myriad incestuous relationships and bickerings there are in the crew's community, he's never tried it on with her. Never said a bad word to say of her, nor she him.

Danu brushes mud from her skirt.
Morrie's still watching her.

THRE

that it's not love, and
from. I dream that I
at bridge. Why in these drea
real name, when I always tei

you are called Cupid. The only person I've
precise arrow that could rip through my h
it dry. I wonder if, for me, you would
the same shaft. I would never ask you to
if you would.

good that I never lingered to speak to you
I did. Than you allowed. Love shot through
s might be like all other kinds of love - a potent
ing. A passionate thing. A life or death thing. You
ave looked me in the eye. Asked me how much I co
ou. I could not have lied with my response to su
ion, asked so directly, asked by you.

when I remember your eyes. More than anything
they saw into me. And I saw into them. I wa
it. Too scared to be looked at.

I remember your mouth. The exact w
seek to
clasp
along
screws from the
things clink in her pockets.

Black pepper makes her sneeze, clearing her nostrils of a
build-up of scents. Her eyes wake to the colours of thickly
painted doors, illuminated under lamplight. Running her palms
over the cracked layers of paint, each door of these houses
becomes a history of colours. They began bright, there were
many years of ochres followed by decades of paler hues. What
colours would they have been when her parents were here? Now,
they're bright colours again.

...ams I love you.
...feel when I'm fully awake. And
...s too intense to feel.
The world keeps turning around. Son,
At other times I think it's turning grey
me, or dust in my eyes?
I miss you and don't even know what
is a life, my life, to lead. And I have to do
to stop thinking of you. I don't yet know how
Unless you're here in this city I've found m
ing like yourself or in disguise. Sometimes I'm
are here somewhere, though surely this is in
You're beside some other river. Still fishing.
If you are here, come and find me. I'm feeling
ly or stupidly running away from
I just have to love you.

Beside the door, a wall reads: The Matryoshka Museum is empty and dark.

She walks along the alleyway and she is to a set
of crumbling buildings. There are many broken pla
outer circle, and this one looks like a giant, my grow
gaps in the timber.

The museum door is propped open, so she goes in.
Welcome Board appears to replace the need for staff, as it in
what can be found behind four closed doors. One room is about
geothermal energy and electricity production in the city. Another
is about the local geology, another is about mountain wildlife.

The fourth room is about Matryoshka's history, and this is
the one which most interests her. It's a small windowless room
where text is printed in a handwritten font all over the white
walls. Within the quietness of this empty room she reads:

FIVE FOR AN ELEMENT

every w
 somehow, w
 You'd not spike
 .em. But you mark
 anting my dreams - awa
 ause I think you're made of
 tie themselves together with pro
 other kind which I don't yet understa
 for you everywhere. I never find you.
 ould you do something for me? Look at any
 ou're beside some river, like as not. Not real
 longing that makes me seek signs of you. So
 river, pick a blade of grass. Something as usual
 a said you were an artist as well as a fisherwoman. S
 angry and colour is grass? We all call it green. But you w
 think of her than most people would. Can you see it's
 teenage orphan hope you can. Those colours you see are the
 small kind of use just one word to describe anything
 for ignoring the cover all the other colours which are
 faithful lover blade's blues, pinks, yellows
 linger on her with yearning, as I am?
 see one colour, the

But now Morrie thought find you all
 just had his and scribe them y
 for her looks to come back from he cavar
 been some fearful gift. Especially d he t
 - rotten and missing her. He sh rs, all
 stench. islee
 he's

The field's quiet outside, with eve
 last be in bed.

Morrie sits himself down and lig
 s a half-burned candle.

Dea... the way
...own, found,
...stairs, or is she
...of Danu? Their
...together through
...e there.

I am so alone here
every time I speak to any
potentially lovable? What if everyone
every person I met, it might kill me. And
my mind or heart or wherever emotion lives
somehow been changed. I now think I could
every single person I meet. How is that possible?

How many people are we capable of
know? I wish I could meet you again
these things. Just once would do
forgotten ever having met me. In a
time passes more quickly than this
might forget having met you as well
anyone else I've ever met. Thinking
this so?

I need to see you again. I feel
trapped, at times. Because I need to see
find a way. Your river is so far from here
the other side of the world. I have no
wings of my own to travel to where you are
again. I'd know who you really are.

perhaps, what love really is.
the window to let in air. Th
sing them.
sing as wide as a lip.
lips. She
these are
because a
the
mea. She holds
dancing with it. The

Danu is still looking for the
parts of her body belong to her a.

...re white, the
Two stems of
windowsill. She
...ves her emptied
...the night away
...illuminated by

...the ceiling. An
...small enough
...bed. She leaves
...anything, as if
...dows are lies.

...s face in her
...bones. The
...breasts, this is
...somewhere to
...from their rich
...hand as if she's
...her. She's

...ferences. Which
...arts are shared?

SIX
 ing for you.
 is to yearn, then
 I've shut out all of
 colour in each thing
 there are hundreds, ju
 t. I would say, 'Your lat
 ght. I want you to have a
 ou find in me, even if it b
 ou are not here.

At lunchtime, if you forgot me as soon as the main street of
 the outer city, hing more than catch fish in the squares, she
 looks around in grey on white paper, ev Most of them
 that river, I yearn for wh Most of them
 must work, your face, your voice, those fe with them other
 the things were real to me, in that moment. Pieces of old
 seem realer to me now, than this city w m eyes, and
 now that this is the wrong way around.

A part of me is still beside you. I'm juggling three rocks. One for you
 I'm juggling three rocks. One for you
 am trying to call home, and one for
 os have allowed myself to love. Y
 es. I don't know which rock will f
 The she up one, will I look for it, and le
 human. And down in three currents?
 the flock as I know I have to choose. I
 had. It rejoined. I can hold on to.

How do people are their own kind?
 Two apron-cla ench, eating cakes with
 plastic forks. The a other, laughing as they
 spoon cream and the new things
 mouths.

Smiling, Danu discover here fill
 But one wipes her skin as the other takes their
 rubbish to the bin. Their break is over. They disap-
 pear back into a

f you
 r. I picture
 case yo

ss my put
 to who

er
 ror her
 dy forg
 parted
 thoughts of
 le them from
 come so hard
 is city felt

keep
 rotten
 want

me one letter. Some
 nges, and so sudd
 perhaps this is
 the new things

SEVEN FOR
NEVER

I think you would be beside me in seconds if I
found myself drowning.
If you were drowning, I think I'd know. And I'd be beside you.
I think you would be beside me in seconds if I found myself drowning.
If you were drowning, I think I'd know. And I'd be beside you.

At the same time, the intricate silver gate comes into view. There's a large letter embossed in the wall beside it. The wall which surrounds the inner Circle is high, and its surface is smooth polished metal which tilts outwards slightly at the top. It would be impossible to climb.

She puts her eye to a gap between metal leaves. On the other side of the gate is a narrow staircase coated in copper. High above the staircase there are tall green turrets and minarets. A mist pours down, hiding this view away.

She listens.

There's such stillness, here. Peace. She traces the silver leaves with her thumb. They're edged with gold.

Silence.

Light comes in a warm glow from the moon. The edges of the high buildings flicker, disappearing and reappearing.

Dear Cupid,

I still long to see you again. Making you, and
me. You can't possibly be the man I hold in my
as long after I met you. Time doesn't fly, it swims
sometimes far too slowly. Sometimes faster than light
the height of the stars. I must be making you up
so long ago that I met you. Making you up into a
one I could love. Not the person you really are

When waking myself against imagining people into
eggshells, I try to hold on to what I know. The f
drinking, I see the nature of you now. You wear blu
wing with his first. You care about others, bi
of hospital - is this might be true of you, frontment, t
on we had by the river.

But this feeling still remains - that you
- and that is what must surely be my own
a bricome thing I've lost so long ago I've forgotten
shift and you are still the one person that somehow I
shatters, I doubt this want, this desire. Constantly.
hide all
Dant
nothing find it.
Keep going

At the top of the case, the circles have move
She has arrived in an area lined with stern limestone buildings.
People are dressed smartly, move purposefully, and disappear into
offices. As she walks, the air changes. It's peppered with flecks.

Danu's fingertips sweep along a ridged stone wall surrounding
one of the primary schools. Children shriek behind it. A bell
clangs, once, twice. A door creaks, children's voices chatter. A
whistle sounds. The door slams.

the staff

progress up
words across th

Cupid,

ry time I think of you, this tho
hat you're made of love, resonan
king the same thing of me. And te.
ut that, is that you might be right.

words over and
he climbs the s
n bottle, s
dian

over again until What if you are made of love? Whese
airs to the attic? That it's not that I can't love, it's that hen s
lumps into h made of love and once I start flooding w
jmed Win? I could love so indiscriminately n the grec
ughtening idea. Hurt and hurt and hurt arms of a guar
to her possible. Do you have this under control? I'm burgundy numb
daughter, why I've felt for so long that I'm in herself or bso
clumsy that sh while

Danu stands tall much r thin line,
Rosa can't sense her times I feel as if I'm wearing
travel wherever she skin. Too raw to love
ough control. If I let p

As long as Rosa can know the people ce. Jode made sure that
her daughter was the d will care too mghter in the Inner Circle.
Rosa soaked that love int an imprint on grew Though she's now
an adult, parts of her don again becau
be naughty tease, get ang out more about ow up. She wants to play,
loves too hard and falls to ning to each much, swim and fly. She
she often re it. Ju and eats so much sugar
tion in which Rosa sai he remembers a conversa
Seriousness binds people he seriousness?
As adults, we should st the ground.

Danu might walk a sugar you sugar Thank you sugar as high as she
can reach. Which of you sunb Thank you sunb had the better life?

Rosa can travel for. be grateful for. and roll down the dunes
of deserts, as lo rocks, and love for sand.
She can caress while she's harmed as long as she feels love for
ness and red gratitude.



Figure 29. *Sandpaper Page-Dust*. Photo: Jessica Chubb.

Endnotes

1. Pericles Lewis, *Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 107.
2. Barry Miles, "The Future Leaks Out: A Very Magical and Highly Charged Interludes," in *Cut-Ups, Cut-Ins, Cut-Outs: The Art of William S. Burroughs*, ed. Colin Fallows, Synne Genzmer, and Ursula Hubnel-Benischek (Vienna: Kunsthalle Wien, 2012), 23.
3. Miles, *Future Leaks Out*, 31.
4. Chris Kraus, *After Kathy Acker: A Literary Biography* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2017), 156.
5. I publish under my own name: Jess Richards, and my novels are called *Snake Ropes* (2012), *Cooking With Bones* (2013), *City of Circles* (2017). They are published by Sceptre, Hodder & Stoughton, London.
6. Some words had to be discarded as they were in the dialect I'd invented for my first novel, and couldn't be used for this purpose as they were too linked to the setting and characters contained within the novel.
7. My definition of 'freewriting' is very fast writing in response to a 'prompt'. It is usually done at a time of morning or night when the brain is tired and the subconscious can be accessed.
8. Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma" in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 163.
9. Van der Kolk and van der Hart, *Intrusive Past*, 163.
10. E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 20.
11. Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, 160.
12. Greg Evans, "15 red flags which show you could be the victim of emotional abuse," *The Independent*, accessed: June 18, 2018, <https://www.indy100.com/article/emotional-abuse-victims-signs-gaslighting-finances-manipulation-8225011>.
13. "Narcissus and Echo (A Greek Myth)," *Uexpress*, accessed June 16, 2018, <https://www.uexpress.com/tell-me-a-story/2004/5/2/narcissus-and-echo-a-greek-myth>.
14. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence – from domestic abuse to political terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 204.
15. I started writing *City of Circles* in January 2013 and it was published in 2017.
16. Sarah Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (London: Continuum, 2007), 12.
17. Dillon, *Palimpsest*, 47.
18. Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 28.
19. One iteration of this performance/video/text work was Drowning/Undrowning, performed with Sally J Morgan as Morgan + Richards at the Triggering Memory Symposium, Massey University, Wellington, NZ, 2015. The video (with text as soundtrack) has been shown internationally.

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Biographical Note

Jess Richards is the author of three novels, which are published by the literary fiction imprint of Hodder & Stoughton, UK. She also collaborates as Morgan + Richards with Sally J Morgan (a conceptual artist who has shown in galleries across the world). Together, they blend the visual and the written word in performance/installations. Jess is currently studying towards a PhD at the College of Creative Arts, Massey University, Wellington.

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