

Submission as fulfilment of MA in Creative Writing
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
27 June 2022

Name: Chloë Reid
Student Number: 2414172
Course: MA in Creative Writing
Research Title: Everyone Agrees

This document consists of the following elements:

Plagiarism Declaration (Page 2)
Abstract (Page 3)
Manuscript: Everyone Agrees (Page 4 - 67)
Reflective Essay: Who's Everyone? (Page 68 - 99)

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
School of Literature, Language and Media

SENATE PLAGIARISM POLICY

Declaration by Student:

I Chloë Reid (Student number: 2414172) am a student registered for Masters in Creative Writing in the year 2022. I hereby declare the following:

- **I am aware that plagiarism (the use of someone else's work without their permission and/or without acknowledging the original source) is wrong.**
- **I confirm that ALL the work submitted for assessment for the above course is my own unaided work except where I have explicitly indicated otherwise.**
- **I have followed the required conventions in referencing the thoughts and ideas of others.**
- **I understand that the University of the Witwatersrand may take disciplinary action against me if there is a belief that this is not my own unaided work or that I have failed to acknowledge the source of the ideas or words in my writing.**

Signature: 

Date: 27 June 2022

ABSTRACT

Everyone Agrees is a collection of sixty very short stories that observe relationships between people, and between people and objects. Accompanying the stories is an essay that reflects on my personal development as a writer within the context of the contemporary art space, how this shaped my writing style, the genesis of various stories and the work of several writers and artists who draw directly from found material and their own experiences in order to explore the intricacies of human interaction.

Everyone Agrees
by Chloë Reid

Archaeologist	7
Work	8
Anna	9
Golden	10
Six Omens	11
Physio	12
Sorry	13
The Neighbour	14
Recovery Time	15
Invincible Summer	16
Tell me again	17
Story	18
OK	19
The Gallery	20
What She Could	21
Dust	22
Psychologist	23
Glider	24
Corner Shop	25
The Outdoors	26
Keys	27
The Enlightenment	28
Wish	29
Epilogue	30
Robert	31
Weekly Report	32
Deep Stretch	33
Lynne	34
Baked In	35
Crowded Place	36
Sir	37
The Whole Arm	38
Unfounded	39
Gargoyles	40

The Feeling	41
Paper	42
Word	43
Occasionally	44
Displeased	45
Staffordshire Bull Terrier	46
Options	47
Louise	48
The Child	49
The Steel Bridge	50
Moon	51
The Coy Deer	52
Giulia	53
Feelings	54
The Birds	55
Even Then	56
Rejection	57
Exhibition Statement	58
Everyone Agrees	59
You Need to Ask Yourself	60
Painkillers	62
Spaghetti Junction	63
The Christmas Tree of Dysfunction	64
Confrontational	65
Epigenetics	66
Outline	67

Archaeologist

A good archaeologist finds what he is looking for. A great archaeologist finds what is actually there. Nobody knows for certain whether the King was in fact a King, ruling for half a century over a prosperous people, or a builder or farmer. When looking for artefacts, an archaeologist must learn to distinguish existing narratives (spiritual, political, historical) from the narratives summoned by the cool forms he finds in the ground.

Work

She's got so much work to do she can't sleep. I tell her I'm also not sleeping because of all the work I have to do. She doesn't know how she's going to get it all done. I relate to that, I say. It's not that she's not grateful for all the work she has, it's just hard having to work all the time and she cries a lot. I tell her I understand where she's coming from because I say horrible things to people who don't deserve it as a result of all the pressure I'm under with all the work I have to do and later I cry about it. She worries her boyfriend is going to break up with her because of all the work she has to do. I tell her I have so much work to do I don't even have a boyfriend. I begin to describe what happened with the last one but realise as her eyes begin to glaze over that this isn't relevant to the conversation. I ask her whether all the work she has to do has implications for her diet and she says she eats terribly because of all the work she has to do and I know where she's coming from because I do too. She says she gets to nine pm sometimes and realises she hasn't eaten all day and I say that never happens to me because I have so much work to do I have to eat constantly to calm my nerves. I suggest going for a walk and she just wishes she had the time.

Anna

Anna, the lady's maid, loves Mr Bates (John – since their first kiss in the courtyard), and could never love another man (Mr Molesley in this case). Mr Bates can't be with Anna because he is still married to Mrs Bates, who refuses to give him a divorce. Mr Bates once went to jail for Mrs Bates (she stole some silverware and he confessed to it) but there is no longer any love between them. Mr Bates was an alcoholic then, but hasn't had a drink since going to jail. Mrs Bates is threatening to go to the press about Mr Bates's employer's unmarried daughter, who had relations with a Turkish diplomat that ended in him dying of a heart attack in her bedchamber. The only people who knew about this initially, other than the unmarried daughter, were Anna, the unmarried daughter's mother and a kitchen hand (Daisy) who caught a glimpse of them carrying the Turkish diplomat's body back to his own bedchamber. Daisy, who is young and naïve, was pressured into telling two of the other servants, who have been plotting against Mr Bates for various reasons since he first started work at the house. Word then got out among the servants of houses nearby and reached Mrs Bates. So Mr Bates can't be with Anna without risking his employer's unmarried daughter's reputation.

Golden

Golden isn't her favourite colour, but it's an answer that might help prolong the conversation. His response that golden isn't a colour is disappointing but doesn't deter her. She composes a message about golden being a conditional colour, not fixed, like his favourite colour, which he says is green. Why does she want to talk to this stranger who gives stupid answers to stupid questions? She doesn't know the full spectrum of her motivation, only that loneliness features there somewhere, and boredom. Golden is effected by light or heat and appears in passing. She doesn't send this to him but she's sure he'd find it poetic. She wonders if it is poetic. He's an actor and when she asks if he plays the good guy or the bad guy, he responds in what she reads as a sarcastic and defensive tone that he wouldn't have a job if he couldn't be both of those things. She wonders if he does have a job. He wants to know if she is a good or bad artist. She says it depends.

Six Omens

A blazing light burned in the sky above the town. It was the shape of a pointing finger. If you spoke of it, it disappeared.

Two young women linked arms on the way to market. When they arrived at the market and tried to reach for vegetables their linked arms fused together in a braid. This happened to a number of young women in the town for whom linking arms was a common practice. The advice of the local doctor was that the women be painted with an egg-and-milk solution, wrapped in newspaper and made to lie very still in a cool, dark room. This was effective in releasing the bind between some but not all of the young women.

A stray dog wandered into the town. The other stray dogs in the town whimpered and moved away when they saw it. The dog's face was a mirror. When you looked at it, you saw your own reflection. This only happened when you looked at it at the same time as it was also looking at you so a number of people had to experience it before it was believed to be the case.

An enormous tree, hundreds of years old, uprooted itself and fell on its side.

An elderly woman woke up in the night to a feeling of pressure at the end of her bed. When she opened her eyes she found a headless man sitting there. The man appeared every night for several weeks. He didn't move from his position or cause her harm. She spoke only to her neighbour of this, who believed her, as she was an earnest and trustworthy old woman, well respected in the town.

A wild and erratic wind spread a fine, lilac dust over every surface in the town. When the inhabitants tried to sweep it up, the wind blew again, replacing the lilac dust with a pale yellow layer of dust and so forth.

Physio

She hoped the physio might recognise that what she really wanted was someone to talk to whose eyes wouldn't glaze over as soon as she got to the part about South Africa being so much more conservative than other parts of the world she'd been fortunate enough to live in. The physio told her to approach the corner of the room, position her left lower arm flush with the wall leading in from the left, and her right lower arm flush with the wall leading in from the right, and walk into the corner. She said to do this as often as possible.

Sorry

If we go to the car and still can't find it, will you say sorry?

If we go to the car and I find it, will *you* say sorry?

Okay.

Okay.

The Neighbour

The neighbour is in finance. She takes hallucinogenic drugs to escape the rigid structure of her working life. The artist takes hallucinogenic drugs as a way to deal with the anxiety he experiences as a result of having little or no structure in his life. The neighbour wants to know if the artist read the article she forwarded about the use of hallucinogenic drugs as treatment for various psychiatric conditions. The artist did read it. He sees it as a resurgence of a trend that began in the seventies. He is going to forward the neighbour an article about this.

The person in the back of the car once took mushrooms rolled into chocolate balls that were delicious but had little effect. He felt very calm afterwards, which was fine, but he prefers not to feel that calm in a social setting. He would rather feel calm at home on his own where he need not be concerned with making meaningful contributions to conversations. Being so calm he was obviously not concerned about this at the time of eating the chocolate balls. He became concerned later when he was reminded that after eating them he had said nothing for twenty-four hours, even when spoken to.

The neighbour suggests that for at least part of that time he must have been asleep. The artist wants to know whether he has considered that there might not have been any hallucinogenic drugs in the chocolate balls after all. He has considered this.

Recovery Time

You can tell how fit you are from your recovery time. You go for a run and the amount of time it takes for you to catch your breath once you've stopped is a gauge of how fit you are. I've been thinking maybe it works similarly but in reverse with you and me. We spend time together and afterwards I feel intensely, but the intensity recedes fairly quickly. Maybe, as we get to know one another and become more intertwined, the amount of time it takes to feel normal again will increase, until it eventually becomes quite hard to be apart for too long.

Invincible Summer

The mug on your desk quotes the famous writer under his picture. He died tragically young enough to remain eternally good-looking. *In the depths of winter I finally learned that there was in me an invincible summer.* He is eternally in a trench coat, smoking a Gauloise on the mug on your desk. You are at your desk in the depths of winter, where his invincible summer mocks you. In spite of yourself, you reach for those unimaginable evenings when you lie with a damp towel over your body, willing the arms of the fan to slice faster through the thick heat. You reach for that turn in the season when you remember ankles, knees, elbows, when, for a few days, you stare at strangers' calves. You remember your own limbs – recognising them, as if from a distance. You think about the moment where your body submits and moves beyond the discomfort and indignity of the temperature's effects, where you swelter, as a collective, with everyone around you. The sky refuses to surrender to night and when it does, it holds fast to the heat that lingers long after dark. You know that when Camus spoke about the depths of winter, he was probably referring to something far more abject than the circumstances you find yourself in, at your desk, where you've forgotten what it feels like to wear shorts or to wake up with sun in your eyes. But his invincible summer serves, if only superficially, to remind you of the fever you'll feel again on the other side of this.

Tell me again

Tell me again about your infected gums, the arrogant client, the emotionally abusive father, the manipulative and calculating ex-boyfriend, the recurrent headaches and lack of sleep, the crippling anxiety, the party you had to miss because of work, the friend who takes you for granted. What I'd like to hear is how poor your diet is because of all the pressure, how this causes outbreaks on your skin as if things could get any worse. I want to know about how your brand new kettle broke and you threw away the slip and still didn't find it after digging through the dustbin – how this all made you feel. How sad you are that your special friends are now emigrating and confused about whether the neighbour actually likes you or just tolerates you. You had to miss your holiday because of the pandemic, which was really the first time you would have had a holiday in so long. You feel the cold more than most people, which makes working in a shared space really complicated, especially because you can't stand confrontation. Having to ask someone to turn the aircon down is really your worst nightmare, worse even than having to phone an emergency plumber on a public holiday. You've had to do this now more times than you can remember because of the old pipes in the building.

Story

The first thing that comes to mind is medieval Europe and a grunting sound. In attempting to move away from everyday narratives where very little happens, and landing on this period in history, is she really just dressing up some aspect of her own life? Let's say for example that her story describes a body of unspecified gender (alive) that is lodged under several dead bodies (the bubonic plague). The sounds the body is making suggest a kind of complacency. They are not nearly as urgent as the narrator feels they should be. The imagery that the writer draws on for the purposes of the story emanate from her experience of having accidentally walked in on an orgy involving multiple bodies at a party, where one of the participants winked at her. Is her story an everyday narrative where very little happens parading as something more interesting, or is she drawing on aspects of her own life to enrich a historical drama? Are these stories actually the same story and the same as all her other stories – the same as the one he says each person has within them and tells over and over? The difference between the stories is *how* they are told.

OK

The key for the guardhouse is attached to the panic button in a mug in the top drawer of the dresser in the hall. You'll need this key if you want to read the *Business Day*, which is delivered there every morning except on Sundays. If you don't collect the newspaper, they'll begin to pile up and eventually impede deliveries. The pile will also upset the other residents in the complex. The code for the alarm in the guardhouse is 5557. Deactivate it upon entering and activate it when you leave, making sure that you lock the guardhouse as well. In the evenings, before you and the dogs go to bed, activate the beams and the electric fence. When you go to bed, deactivate the beams, take the dogs for a wee in the garden, activate the beams again, put the dogs in the guest loo with their bed and activate the internal alarm. If you have a friend to stay, bypass the guest room on the keypad by selecting 'MENU', 'BYP', 'ZONE 25', '0404', before activating the internal alarm. When it's windy or if there is a big storm, you'll need to deactivate the electric fencing in order to avoid being woken up repeatedly in the night by the alarm. When the alarm goes off, CSS Tactical will phone you to find out if everything is OK. If you say 'yes', you'll have to give them a password to confirm it. The password is: WEARESECURE. If you fail to answer the phone or to confirm that everything is OK, CSS Tactical will send a team to the property. This includes one or two men with torches, bulletproof vests and automatic weapons. They are friendly and will assume that everything is OK if you stand at the window and wave at them. If the alarm goes off at night and you aren't sure why, turn on the floodlights. The dogs usually bark if there is an intruder. You might also want to keep the beams on during the day if you're alone in the house. In this case, you'll need to deactivate the beams each time you let the dogs out for a wee. The dogs will let you know when they need to go by pawing at your legs.

The Gallery

She has a regular shift on a Sunday afternoon and only very lonely people come in. They are often angry about the art in the gallery. She understands that their anger originates elsewhere but is triggered by the art, which they can't understand and won't understand. The work, they feel, isn't willing to be understood and doesn't want them to understand it. Just before Christmas, one man yells at her for over an hour and then, exhausted, fumbles through his pockets for a bundled red and green paper napkin. He quickly eats the almonds inside the napkin.

What She Could

She was doing what she could to chase those pinch-me moments. She grew her hair long, threw her head back and laughed at things. She ate chocolate slowly, savouring every bite. She looked attentively at the people around her, making each one feel admired. She sought out sunsets and people to watch them with, laughing, throwing her head back. She took pictures of other people laughing and throwing their heads back. She put the pictures into frames and smiled at them. She propagated plants and watched them spring to life in new pots and earth. She wrote about this in her notebook, smiling. She went swimming in the nude at midnight, screaming and running, diving and screaming, laughing and throwing her head back. She cut her chin open and there was blood everywhere and she was taken to casualty where she vomited everywhere, and still the lovely doctor managed to stitch her up.

Dust

There was already a bag inside when I was given the vacuum cleaner. It belonged to my godmother's mother, Mary, who kept an immaculate home. It doesn't bother me that she was alive and using it not very long ago but I do think about the dust that was in the bag when I got it and the dust that has now joined it. I think about her biscuit crumbs in there with my bits of chips.

Psychologist

Each psychologist has two psychologists to whom she can and must talk regularly. The first psychologist is an ordinary client of the second psychologist with the exception that she happens also to be a psychologist. The role of the third psychologist is to ensure that the first psychologist is stable enough psychologically to do her job, given the nature of it.

If I listen to the psychologist respond to my questions about her job, I am the second psychologist. If she tells me about the desperate phone calls late at night from the woman about her mother and her mother's relationship with her mother, I am the third psychologist. Between us we conclude she is stable enough psychologically to do her job, given the nature of it.

Glider

Handel darts off just as the man with the face like a puppy approaches. You're disappointed by how easily he is willing to abandon your conversation about cultural appropriation at parties, where to draw the line etc. You value Handel's insights, generally. This feeling is soon replaced with a different kind of disappointment as the man with the face like a puppy begins to tell you about the feature film he hopes to make this year, how he has come to know the Bransons and that he has no regrets about spending his youth seeing the world instead of revising in windowless halls. Thomas (Tommy), who swears you've met before, understands better than most that there's no better teacher and no better tonic than the unknown but he does sometimes wonder whether his career might have taken a different turn had he accepted the Fulbright all those years ago, whether this may have made it easier for him to find a producer for his film etc. Handel had obviously been subjected to this or some related monologue before. Still, as you glance over to where he is now, huddled in a corner with a groaning, be-sequined mass, you wonder whether he is any better off. Tommy pinches your arm, says he has to speak to a man about a horse, and leaves you, alone. You cast around for a drink and are relieved to see a hand appear with something cool and cloudy. Wade, who you know only by name, says nothing but moves to stand alongside you, looking out across the room. Camilla (small, angular, shy-by-day) is trying to get onto the shoulders of a taller, tented figure you don't recognise. She scampers from chair to bookcase and finally, shrieking, finds her post. The tented figure is unruffled and continues her conversation with the barman throughout. The barman (Ray, ancient) is tired and bored. The be-sequined mass into which Handel has been absorbed, is now pitching out of the corner and into the centre of the room to writhe with other, miscellaneous bodies. You picture yourself in the glider, above the sea, and suddenly can't remember if it was you in the glider or someone else, who then described the experience to you.

Corner Shop

The man at the corner shop asks me if I have a cold. Last time he asked me if I'd been crying. I hadn't been crying and I don't have a cold but I'm mostly in a bad mood when I go to the corner shop. I imagine this reflects in my face but it feels invasive, him asking. What if I had been crying? I don't go to the corner shop primarily to buy things though I always buy at least one thing as a courtesy. The corner shop is a block away from my flat. Sometimes I have to walk an extra block on my way home but by the time I get to the door of my building, my mind is clear. When I bump into the woman from upstairs, I let her know how sorry I am that she's not doing well, and I mean it.

The Outdoors

Not for the first time, she drops the phone on her face. She has a tired arm from lying in her bed and scrolling through pictures of men who love the outdoors. None of them claim to love the indoors but a lot of them love gaming. Some of them love the outdoors and gaming. Much of what she reads in their profiles makes her worry there's something she's missing. She has been assured there is nothing more to the cat or dog statements than a preference for one or the other. Star signs offer a channel for considering a person's character. A winking face next to the star sign means he doesn't take that kind of thing too seriously.

The profiles she's most drawn to are the ones that make jokes. His read: 'Everyone I know thinks they're good at driving and have good taste in music'. He sent her lots of photos of his penis, which was a first for her, though most of her friends had been sent them. When she messaged him to say she worried that their interaction lacked the requisite depth for a meaningful and lasting connection, he sent her drawings of his penis. He asked her if she thought there was a market for that kind of thing, whether women are interested in buying tastefully drawn images of naked men. They were tastefully drawn.

When they met in person he told her that her one eye was smaller than the other and that they disarmed him. He spoke about a recent incident where he had reprimanded someone for throwing his chip packet onto the pavement. He said he isn't the kind of person to sit and do nothing if he hears a woman being beaten up outside his house.

Keys

The keys are made from reeds you snap off at the joins. With the right amount of force, the good ones snap clean. If the reed snaps too easily, you'll get a brittle key that doesn't last. If the reed is too green, it'll be hard to snap or won't snap clean. A key's size is determined by the distance between joins on a reed, which varies. A range of sizes will provide access to a range of portals, so it's worth taking time to select your reeds. You have all afternoon.

The reeds you use for the keys are the same as the reeds you loop through the gills of the trout to make a handle. You don't fish but your dad and sister do. You go with them, because of the reeds and because they need your help to carry the trout back to the house. Your dad and sister do the work of looping the reeds through the gills, which you are unable to do without imagining it happening to you. You don't feel bad for the trout, but you don't like the way they look at you, always with one eye. A slim, green reed can be looped through a maximum of three medium trout and loosely tied to make a handle. You wear this over your shoulder. Under your arm, your jacket gleams. At the house, your dad shows you and your sister how to gut the fish. He shows you the small wet heart. You ask him if the fish has a poo in it. He can't see one and thinks it probably pooped just before it died. Do people do that? Sometimes. Later, when you ask your uncle the same question, he says it depends how you die or how you feel just before you die. You enter the keys into the logbook by pressing them onto the paper and tracing their shape with a pencil. You note their length. In a separate section, you draw the trout's heart. You tear this out of the logbook and leave it on your dad's pillow. You draw a cross-section of the fish with a question mark in the bowel area, which you leave in the logbook, under the date.

The Enlightenment

She can't understand why everyone's talking about the Enlightenment (bad) and she's afraid to ask. She doesn't know a lot about it but the concept feels tired and old. She's old, and tired at having to educate herself at this stage of her life – not only on what it used to mean, but on what it means now. She knows it has something to do with rationality (bad) and reason (bad). Recently, she also heard something dismissed as 'Cartesian' (bad). She knows enough to be able to associate these terms with old white men (bad) who like straight lines (bad) and struggle with nuance (good). She knows that rational logic (bad) is positioned opposite emotional (good) and bodily (good) logic and that these terms are gendered (bad) and valued respectively in problematic (bad) ways. She can see it's important to make certain terms contemporary rather than forget them, when the legacy they represent continues to have implications for society. However, she's concerned some of these terms are getting more airtime than they reasonably (bad) need. She wants to be on the good side of history (good), which she knows is not the right (bad), but she's worried that her ability to get there may be hampered by her having watched too many miniseries.

Wish

Josh would like to be swallowed whole, but not to be alive once swallowed. Or to go in his sleep. Emma would like to be sitting in a chair, engaged in a long ebbing and flowing conversation with an old friend, or her sister, when it suddenly ends. Ben wouldn't want to die like Steve Irwin, by stingray, not after a career spent risking his life chasing wild animals. Anja feels that the manner in which Irwin died was befitting of someone so drawn to the natural world. She feels similarly about the old woman who swam out to sea every day, well into her nineties, and was one day eaten by a shark. Daniel is afraid of drowning but would like to go out sailing and never return. Shots from a revolver are unlike those from a pistol. A revolver must be reloaded with each shot, leaving an agonising wait for the person being shot multiple times. Amos wouldn't wish it on anyone.

Epilogue

The novel is stripped bare. His sentences are bones, long past the point of being recognisable as part of any single body. He leaves no comforts for his readers, nothing to lean on as they scrape their way through the text. They are compelled to carry on by means of a force that is known only to those who have crossed deserts or summited peaks. The strongest among them reach the epilogue.

Robert

I found Robert, more inquisitive than concerned, at the top of the stairs outside my flat looking for the fire. I had an extinguisher in my arms, which I had broken out of its box in the courtyard. I said he could come in and see the fire from my window. I'd heard it first as popping. It took me some time to realise this was the mielies beside the spruit. Every surface of my lounge was covered in paper and paintings – a series of commissions I was on the verge of completing when the corn started popping outside my window. I explained to Robert that I was an artist. He said like a Fine Artist and I said yes. He said that must be very hard and I said it was fine.

Once he had concluded that the fire was not a danger to us, that it would likely blow itself out and weren't we lucky there wasn't any wind, I ushered him towards the front door. He said is that you, pointing to a picture and I said it's a portrait of my mum when she was a child.

I liked Robert then, but less so the next time I saw him when he came around to my car window as I was about to leave and said your wing mirror is damaged. I said thank you, yes.

This afternoon he knocked at my door while I was cutting my hair. I try not to move around when I cut my hair because of the mess so I waited until he knocked a second time before I went to the window by the door. His face was there and he said I just want to let you know there's a scratch on your car. I said thank you, yes.

Weekly Report

It's the act of writing the weekly report that's important. They think we're trying to track what they do, measure them up against each other. What they don't realise is that by recording everything they've done in a week, they become more conscious of the connection between their work and its outcomes. This leads them to make better decisions about what they do and when. They begin to ask questions such as: Does this activity have long or short-term benefits? What percentage of my time should I be spending developing relationships with clients and suppliers? Are some of these relationships more productive than others? Which ones? Why? Do I need to do an audit of these relationships? Are these relationships strictly professional? It also means that when they put together their monthly report, they can see whether there is a pattern of successes or failures in their work. If we let them know that the main purpose of the weekly report is what they gain from writing it and that most of the information they provide is available on the system anyway, they might not take it seriously. There's a subtlety that I worry will get lost in translation. Do me a favour, if Barry brings it up again, ask him why he thinks we'd want to encourage competition between our employees?

Deep Stretch

They roll out their mats and do a deep stretch. They do this together, though she does it on 22 October 2016 and he does it every evening around five-thirty in 2021. He doesn't mind that she can't see or hear him. He knows her well enough to assume it doesn't worry her that he gets a little older each time. His practice grows deeper and his body more flexible. About halfway through the class, she wonders aloud where her students are and what time it is there, which is enough for him.

Lynne

A few hours before she died, Lynne's mother wanted to know if there were young women dancing around her. I'm cutting Lynne's hair on the lawn. The gleaming surface of the pool is dusted with the wispy grey-blond ends of her hair. As I make my way around her head, she tells me she's mapped out all the parts of the story but still doesn't know what its meaning will be. She's written about the crook of her mother's arm as she lay sleeping with her eyelids not fully closed, halfway there, about the feeling of an ending. Her mother was always eager for the next thing. When she retired to Johannesburg it was to begin her new life of theatre visits, exhibition openings and eating at restaurants. But the feeling Lynne had at her mother's bedside was of something final, with nothing more to come. I tell her I'm not sure it's up to her to decide what the meaning of the story will be, not at this stage anyway. I suggest she give her mother another name so that she can write without feeling guilty or insincere. Before I started cutting, Lynne showed me pictures in a magazine of a towering woman with a chic white bob. She said she wanted to grow her hair out to look something like that.

Baked In

He's an only child. He doesn't have people baked in. So he's had to learn to be sympathetic in order to draw people to him. A big part of this is learning how to listen. This is hard because we really only want to talk about ourselves. Does he find, when he makes an effort to listen to people, he becomes interested in what they are saying, even if he didn't expect to be? Not really. Has he mastered the appearance of being interested (its postures and sounds) to the extent that he need never know or understand exactly what's being said but can still reap the benefits of being seen to be listening? What? What does his body look like when he is listening or appearing to? His hand is on his chin and his head is cocked slightly to one side. He nods and looks into the distance when he wants to show he's processing what's being said. He's learnt to rephrase things, to seem to summarise by drawing out a sentence and repeating it. So you're saying that... What you mean is... What does he do with people once he has drawn them in? He cooks them meals. They go for walks and drinks. They are his friends.

Crowded Place

When you're in the shower, you have to imagine that all the things causing you to feel drained are going down the drain.

I forget to take her advice about this until quite some time into the shower so I have to rush and think of what I want to send down. There's a lot of hair in the drain and if you stay too long the water comes up again.

I think about the supplier who calls me on a Sunday night to 'follow up with sales'. I send them down with the colleague who wants to know if what I did was intentional. I think about the friend and her problems. I send down some of her big sighs. I think about the man and how I sometimes sit staring at my phone waiting for it to say 'online' under his name. When I'm staring at that empty bar at the top and it suddenly says 'online', I feel as if I've caught his eye in a crowded place.

Sir

In the picture online the apartment block is upside down. The base of the image is flooded with sky and edged with leaves. Above this, cars' wheels adhere to brick paving.

Intrigued, you scroll to find that in the second image, the living area and its furnishings are the right way up. When you were a child, your mother told you about the gruesome deaths of people who fell into glass coffee tables – the blood, the coffee, the carpets. Imagine. You could live with a glass coffee table in the centre of your lounge for decades before it killed you.

The bathrooms are somebody's dream. They make you think of something you've read about looking at art when it isn't to your taste. *What would I like about this if I liked it?* The Jacuzzi bath, its transparent turquoise section. *What must the people who like this be like?*

The rentals in your price range have fewer hyphenated words in their descriptions (L-shaped, en-suite, open-plan, 24-hour, remote-controlled), but you make an appointment to view this one because you have never met anyone called Bozena, and in her emails Bozena calls you Sir.

The Whole Arm

She gave me a hand and I took the whole arm. I took the whole arm because I felt entitled to it, having been poorly treated and underpaid by her. She had lovely arms. Not especially toned, a bit flabby, but lightly tanned and without blemishes.

Unfounded

There are several fundamental differences between the stories, which anyone who reads with attention will observe. In his story, the people in the town lose their ability to remember things. While severely debilitating, the consequences of this, for the people and the future of the town, in no way resemble those relating to the loss of sight in the other story. He hasn't even read that book anyway, only the back cover, so the suggestion that his story derives any of its characters, content or plot from that story, is wholly unfounded.

Gargoyles

Everywhere the bulging eyes leer at you, unblinking. The gaping mouths, the lolling tongues. The city is famous for its gargoyles – it's partly why you chose to spend the weekend here. It's the first time you've been away together. The gargoyles lunge from every corner and façade. They belch from every fountain (of which there are many). Others extend their whole sinewy torsos towards you. They want to devour your soft parts and spit out your bones. Back at the hotel, the concierge greets you with a knowing look as you make your way up to your pokey room. You lie on your bed for the heat, and laugh as you try and fail to mimic the local accent. As your bodies move together, slowly, sweaty and lethargic, you think about how you want him. How you have him. You feel lucky. For a moment, you can't imagine being anywhere else or needing more than this. You look at his face and your sweat turns cold. His eyes are bulging. His mouth is gaping. He lunges at you, swallows you.

You lie on your backs. Your breathing slows. You want to talk to him about what you saw, you wonder if he registered any of it. You turn to look at him and his face is calm. His eyes are gently shut. His features are as before, delicate, kind.

The Feeling

She feels like she's being sucked dry by the people around her. Those born on her birthday have the capacity to be unusually sympathetic towards others but when they reach their limit, they lose all sensitivity and behave badly. She explains this by way of context. She also talks about her shame at having recently shouted at the man giving eye tests at the traffic department. Her voice was hoarse for two days after she stormed out and screamed in her car. There was a part of her that had felt exterior when the shouting and screaming was happening, as if she was performing her anger.

She acknowledges she must in part be to blame for having reached this point of saturation. She has made herself available for people to lean on and offload their problems.

Each time she describes the feeling, the response is roughly the same. She's told she needs to look after herself, take care of her own needs, stop being so generous. She nods her head and receives their embraces.

Paper

The paper is kept under the desk near the printer so you have to go through four pairs of legs to get to it. You are as discreet as possible about the business of getting the paper. You duck your head so Brenda's long skirt doesn't dust your forehead as you move through under her chair. You avoid touching Brenda's legs with any part of your body. You do your best to grab quite a lot of paper so you don't have to go back too often and surprise her as she's typing away. You are surprised that Brenda is still surprised by your presence there. You hope she will eventually get used to it and not act all surprised every time and every time remark on it to your mother who is busy working at a larger, messier desk nearby, as if your mother will respond any differently to how she has before, which is to wave her hand at Brenda while on the phone. Sometimes you miscalculate and try to take more paper than the trip in reverse can accommodate. You lose your grip and the paper fans out wildly under the desk. You have to scramble to collect it all before Brenda gets up and stands on the paper and your fingers. Mostly you make it and dash out of the office before Brenda can make a scene.

Word

I see that it's complicated. I'll take it back if you like. It's not a word I would ever use genuinely. It has a squirm or disclaimer built into it. Built into it is my awkwardness in telling you that I like how you look. I suppose it's a kind of backhanded appropriation from an archaic value system. I like to think my use of it acknowledges all the questionable matter that influences attraction. Put this way, I suppose it says more about me than it does about you. And I'm not sure it makes any sense. I'm not good at being wrong, so that, more than reason, might be inspiring my defence of the term.

Occasionally

Occasionally, it stops you breathing. Mostly, it keeps you company – in the way the radio keeps you company while you drive. In some cafés, the chatter and movement of people around you makes you feel at ease. It's mostly like this. When it isn't, it's like something quickly inflating in a space too small for its fullest expression.

You noticed it for the first time after your visit to the great hole. You tagged along with a friend who wanted to trace the edge of the hole. You helped him with this, holding his pencils and bringing him coffee while he worked his way around. You spent more time anticipating his needs and reviewing his drawings, than considering the hole. So you were surprised to find that something in or about the hole remained so palpably with you when you returned home. It might have been with you before you visited the hole, latent. Possibly, its onset merely coincided with the visit, and the two aren't otherwise connected. When you mention it to your friend, he says he's suffered from anxiety since he was a child. It's not like that. You'd miss it if it wasn't with you.

Displeased

If someone asks me when I'm available, I say all the time. If someone asks me what I do, I say nothing.

I'm not sure anymore what counts as a thing being done. Fairly often, I go for a run. I have three meals a day and snacks in between. I look out the window, water the plants, tidy. Occasionally I send an email and wait for a response. Sometimes in between waiting for a response and getting one, I take a bath to distract myself. Sometimes I lie on my bed. Sometimes I fall asleep doing this.

When she comes home, she mostly finds me where she left me. She is displeased.

Staffordshire Bull Terrier

He said this breed loves people but shows no mercy to intruders. A previous client of his didn't even know there was an intruder in her house until she saw the reflection in the mirror of her dog removing the intruder's throat, soundlessly.

Purchased to keep my grandmother company, the Staffordshire bull terrier liked to take her hand in his mouth. She would follow it around the house until he let go.

Options

Up until this point, everything he's done has been about getting to the next thing. Stepping-stones. He now has the headspace and security to choose a direction and find out what he really wants: Does he want to get married and have children? He's decided this is something he wants but he isn't in a hurry. He has started dating and met two very different women both of whom he can see himself being with. Would he consider dating them at the same time? No, but only because he has decided he doesn't want to be with either of them in the long term. Now that he has bought and renovated his own apartment, does he want to buy some art? Yes. He doesn't know what he wants to buy but he knows what he likes. He can see himself being interested in birding, trail-running and cycling but doesn't know which one he should dedicate himself to as an extra-curricular.

Louise

He wanted to know what Louise meant when she commented that the painting was 'achingly beautiful'. He pictured Louise covering her eyes with one hand, her heart with the other. Louise, who regularly responded to text messages with 'Thanks so much!' was so moved by the painting of the wilting flowers that it ached. Did it hurt when she uncovered her eyes to look again? Is it worth looking at a work of art that afflicts you so? He hoped he would never, unwittingly or otherwise, cause anybody pain through his own art, least of all Louise.

The Child

The child keeps falling. It runs around, falls spectacularly, pauses, wails. I'm trying to read but I look up each time, with concern, so its parents don't think me unfeeling. After about the third time I stand up to help the child but sit back down as soon as I see the parents getting up. I try to make eye contact with them as I do this. My expression tells them that I'm sympathetic to both them and the child.

The Steel Bridge

Walkers, runners, commuters, idlers, informal traders and the homeless are mostly unaware of their ability to collapse the steel bridge. The stress caused by a particular resonance can result in the failure of the bridge to support itself and its load. This is achieved when the frequency of vibrations created by movement on the bridge matches the bridge's natural frequency of vibrations.

Moon

It was full moon. He said they'd spoken on the phone, that it hadn't gone well. He was sad and frustrated that she undervalued what they had had together. He said the moon was their thing and when I realised he meant it, I said they would've done well to choose a signifier of their union that was less omnipresent. I don't think he was listening. He often wasn't listening.

He asked me so many times if I played tennis that I began to vary my answers. It reminded me of my mum describing visits to her great aunt: 'Do you have any children? Yes, two girls. Well you must try for a boy! Tennis? Yes, one of each. Do you play? Irregularly. You? Twelve – all boys. I had lots of lessons. Try for a boy! Yes? Yes, once I played tennis.' He played semi-professional once.

Perhaps what he heard were the parts that concerned him, though he was considerate in ways that made it difficult to dismiss him as entirely self-absorbed. He came to Home Affairs with me to apply for an ID that I thought I'd lost but hadn't looked for and found shortly afterwards. He prepared small plates of sliced fruit, one for each of us.

He went to see psychologists, physiotherapists and masseurs. He recommended them to me, with genuine concern, you must go, he said and I said I probably would. I thought about telling him I didn't have any money or health insurance but it would have turned the tone of the conversation.

He got sad when he went to the masseurs, which I understand because once when I was under a lot of pressure I did a two-week yoga trial and found myself feeling increasingly emotional with each session. Then someone told me that you store emotions in your muscles and when you release the muscles, the emotions come out.

The Coy Deer

The coy deer are the most valuable – the ones whose heads are lowered to their left sides. Second are the deer whose noses are pointed upwards as if reaching for leaves. You won't struggle to find what people in the trade call the 'supermodels', the front-facing deer.

I keep mine in the fireplace. I've got a few hundred – a mix of the coy deer and the deer whose noses are pointed upwards. No front-facing deer. Mine are all jade but I've encountered pale-blue, yellow and once, a bronze cast.

Giulia

Giulia is sitting on the staircase outside the flat with her head on her knees when I arrive. She howls my name, reaches out her arms and starts crying as I sit down beside her. She can't remember why she's upset. Something happened that she can't remember but she's also lonely. She loves being alone but the feeling of loneliness has nothing to do with that. She can't remember what it has to do with. I've been drinking but cycled to the flat and got lost on the way, which sobered me up a bit. I haven't been to the city in three years. I think we should go inside. Giulia needs more time outside. Inside, Sean is separating coke into lines on the kitchen table and Sam is holding a rolled up note, which she hands me. Mel takes my arm and pulls me toward the plants that have grown from the cuttings I gave her when I left. They're thriving. Ben is swaying on the dance-floor in the living room and doesn't recognise me at first. He misses Jeanne, who left for Berlin and doesn't want him to join her. She didn't put it like that, but he knows and everyone knows. I go back into the kitchen and sit on the floor with my back against the cupboards, next to a boy who tells me about his thesis. One of his professors is encouraging him to turn it into a doctorate, which frightens him but also excites him. Lily is under the table. I crawl over there and she says she doesn't know how to say what she wants to say, but that if she doesn't tell me now, she's not sure she'll ever have the courage to do it. I don't want to know what it is so I go and check on Giulia, who is still outside but asleep. I cycle back. It's getting light and I'm grateful for the cold air rushing past my ears.

Feelings

The colour drains from his face as she describes her love for the other man, how it's enough for her just to know how it feels to love the other man, even if they can't be together. Her brow is furrowed. She doesn't want to hurt this man but she's also frustrated at having to contain her own grief as she leads a separate but parallel life to her love (the other man), while attending to this man's grief at being refused by her. This man loves her, wants her. He feels entitled to her on account of his comparative wealth and the fact that she is no longer young. She despairs, both at the heart-breaking situation she finds herself in, and at the demands and expectations of the society she lives in. At the end of each take, his colour returns. Her brow is smooth. Each time they begin again, the feelings are summoned, now a little more complex, now a little more worn. That evening, they return to their trailers and begin the process of categorising and storing the feelings for future use. Months later, she wakes up with a pang she hasn't got a place for. He is in the supermarket and can't understand his sudden frustration.

The Birds

She had no idea the birds were so obnoxious before he moved in. He hasn't mentioned it, but it's impossible not to notice them, now. It's impossible not to know and feel how noticeable they must be to him. The birds screech for most of the day and night. She doesn't know how to explain that they never bothered her before. She doesn't know how to explain why she has a radio alarm that wakes her up with the news each morning. She's sure he's troubled by it. The news is bad where they live, violence, corruption, natural disasters. The default setting is talk radio and she's become accustomed to it. She wakes up and knows something about how the world changed while she slept, mostly for the worse. There's also the light above the bed (the fitting has come loose, exposing the electrical wires) the oven (only works if she leans on it), and the venereal disease. Her friend tells her he's probably more intuitive than she gives him credit for. He sees she's uncomfortable about addressing these things, and so makes peace with them in his mind. He doesn't want to change her, or risk creating tension by criticising her way of living. Her friend is sure there are things about him that he can't explain and is ashamed of. She can't think of anything, but can see what her friend is getting at. What her friend is getting at is that she's so absorbed in her own self-doubt that she's blind to other people's struggles. Has he made peace with this too? She hopes he stays.

Even Then

It was Sunday afternoon and they mowed the lawn. It was my birthday and they mowed the lawn. It was Christmas and they mowed the lawn. They mowed the lawn on Election Day and when the water dried up. When the grass stopped growing, they mowed what was left of it. There was a flood, the cars washed away, there was a fire, their dog went missing, the house washed away, they all got sick and many of them died, and even then they mowed the lawn.

Rejection

The hardest part is dealing with the awkwardness people feel when they come into contact with you. Like anyone, he struggles with rejection, but he finds it easier to privately process what has happened than to process other people's responses to it. This extends beyond people who've heard about it from other people; to people who find out about it because you tell them; and even to people who can see you've been rejected by the way you look or walk. It's not about shame, really. It's about having to make peace with the discomfort your rejection causes others and the sympathy they feel compelled to offer you when it happens. His most recent position on the subject is that avoiding rejection has got more to do with saving other people than it has to do with saving yourself.

Exhibition Statement

She's really the last person who would ever criticise drug-usage, especially when it's geared towards healing and self-exploration, but she is concerned that the gallery's audience might not grasp the nuance in the artist's message. Of course she's not suggesting the artist be disingenuous. The gallery is open to all forms of spirituality, and aims, above all else, to support artists in their respective journeys. No, she hasn't been on an Ayhuasca retreat, but she absolutely would if she had the time. And in fact this plays into her argument (suggestion), that they make the exhibition statement a little less specific where the psychedelics are concerned.

Everyone Agrees

People with memorable personalities have strong likes and dislikes. He, for example, hates eggs. He tells people about this and they remember him. They invite him to their dinners and parties, and people who haven't even met him know his name. He expresses inconsequential opinions about things loudly, for example, that celebrities are about as interesting as anyone else. Everyone agrees.

Her opinions are consequential, though she understands this only after expressing them, for example, when she says that cancel culture is the legacy of their generation. She expects people to laugh at this, but several of them leave the table. She likes most things. It's only broccoli she holds back on in public, because it gives her gas.

You Need to Ask Yourself

You need to ask yourself: how can I massage this down?

A skew double of the window stretches across the floor. The light flickers on the checked linoleum as the man paces outside the shop. In her mind the strobe of his stride is the baseline from a blown speaker.

Of course each case is unique. You have to be sensitive to that, but they also need to understand that this is a business.

She got through the first part of her shift without difficulty but her body is beginning to ease its way down now.

I know what you're saying. It's hard to see the bigger picture, but the crucial thing about a shopping spree is that you need to make sure there's room in the fridge. Do you know what I'm saying?

She melts onto the desk. Her cheek is sticky on its surface. She imagines her face and arms flattened and découpaged onto it. Each passing minute is a layer of varnish, embedding her further.

We're so lucky to have you on the team, Alan, we really are. You've got an unusual eye, a capacity to see potential in the most unlikely places. But we need to remember that most of our buyers want happy, easy – not dark and challenging.

The bell rings as the door opens. She tears her cheek off the surface, jerks her body upright in the chair. A woman enters the shop, does a quick sweep with her eyes and exits. After this, it takes her a few minutes to slip back into the rhythm of the man pacing outside. She begins to sink again.

I'm not saying dumb it down, I'm saying be kind to your clientele.

She folds off the chair.

No, no, of course not, that's not what I mean.

The checked linoleum opens up and absorbs her.

You're a vital part of this team and we chose to work with you because – Alan, Alan, hold on a second, I just need to, I just want to –

She gazes up as the floor reforms itself above her. The checks realign. She is submerged, her body no longer an independent unit but part of the matter beneath the shop. The ring of the door is a distant sound. She feels the vibration of the man's feet as he enters the shop. She can see clearly through the floor, but the man's movements lag. He pauses with his feet directly above her face. The undersides of his shoes are evenly rippled, the rubber etched in tight waves. His body is dramatically foreshortened. Her laughter echoes inside and outside of her. The expression belongs both to her, and to the matter in which she is embedded. The man hesitates, frowns, moves towards the door and exits.

Alan, Alan, I –

His steps fall back into their rhythm. She feels it in her body now. She feels the warmth of the light from the window on her face. It shines in her eyes between each step.

Painkillers

I've wondered whether they numb your whole body (a blanket approach), but Paula says they know where to go. If people and articles are to be believed, you may experience the pain in your head but the problem is really in your lower back. The pills know this.

When your heart is broken, painkillers work for emotional pain. This is what Liesl told me. They know.

Your body belongs to you, but other people and articles know what it needs and where the pain is, better than you do.

Spaghetti Junction

I open the door and find him directly in front of me. He says it's a spaghetti junction over here. I get the sense he's wanted to use the expression for some time. Cassie describes him as a middle-aged woman trapped in the body of a twenty-one year old boy. It's rumoured he stole the vodka in the bottle shaped like a skull but I think the accusation has its basis in the feeling of displeasure he arouses in the staff, generally. Still, it's hard to imagine anyone else being foolish enough to steal the most conspicuous thing in the store cupboard. As much as she'd like to pin it on him, Cassie is sure he's the kind of person who doesn't like what alcohol does to his personality. He leaves of his own accord in the end.

The Christmas Tree of Dysfunction

Often the result of a fall, collision or difficult birth, the Christmas tree of Dysfunction manifests as a chain of physical responses that zigzags across the body. Your pelvis is out of alignment, so one hip sits higher than the other. This triggers a reaction in your shoulders where one sits higher than the other on the side opposite to the misaligned hip, which then angles the bones in the cervical spine (neck), etc.

Confrontational

She isn't naturally confrontational but she endeavours to be the kind of person who tells it like it is. She believes people are better off knowing whether their behaviour offends or bores others. What they choose to do with this information (if anything) is their business. She respects those who are brave enough to say something that might initially be hurtful or hard to hear, rather than talk behind a person's back or slowly withdraw from their company. She believes that deep down, most people know they're behaving badly, but struggle to acknowledge it. Being the person who provides this service doesn't worry her in the same way it worries others, though she wouldn't mind getting a little more credit for it.

Epigenetics

That evening at the party, she feels a kind of ancient joy. The feeling, which has no discernible origin in the current arrangement of her own life, makes her wonder about connections between genetics and historical events. She wonders whether a relation of hers had a very good time long ago and if this person's experience can account for the way she feels now.

She tries to describe this to a man who isn't listening. Eldi, whose party it is, has made a cake with rainbow-coloured layers. She cuts a slice to barter with the man, who is smoking a cigarette that she wants to smoke. The cake and the cigarette fizz in her mouth and in spite of the company, she feels that her cup is overflowing.

Outline

You are an outline, and you remain that way when you meet. Even after you meet, it could take weeks, years, decades, to be filled in. You have been described or mentioned by a friend, or several people. Your name has come up. There might be nothing memorable or striking in the description, but it is logged. When you finally meet, the description has fermented and mingled with all the other descriptions and become something else. It sits in front of you when you meet and for as long as it takes for you to be seen behind it, which may be never.

Who's Everyone?

A Reflection on the writing of *Everyone Agrees*

Everyone Agrees is a collection of sixty very short stories. The stories observe relationships between people, and between people and objects. They are fictional, but draw from my own experiences of spoken, written and internal dialogue and occasionally from found material, such as a news item, myth, instructions for house sitters, a motivational quote or the plot of a popular television series. Though each story should work individually, *Everyone Agrees* is designed to be read in one sitting.

I think preparations for writing are unnecessary. My preparations were nothing to do with writing, they were much more to do with overcoming the difficulty of seeing myself as someone who wrote (Tripp 2020: online).

For most of my adult life, I have worked as an artist. Writing is for me one of a series of displacement activities that I have used to occupy space left by other mediums. I've displaced my way through drawing, printmaking, performance, video, audio and painting (with some back and forth). One medium has taken the place of another at points where I felt I had exhausted my capacity to create within the material or conceptual limitations of the medium, or become tired of myself as articulated through it. Moving from one medium to another and later moving back again has in some cases enabled me to unstick whatever it is that I am stuck with.

Maybe this is just a circuitous way of saying that my practice is multi-disciplinary – a coverall term that is used both to describe work that involves a range of media, and to suggest an expansive and dynamic capability. I think my approach is narrower than this. Positioning my work in relation to a particular discipline enables me to understand how it might be received by a reader or viewer. I don't generally drift from one medium to another, picking and choosing the parts that suit a project. I treat each discipline individually, as new territory, with its own discourse and

parameters that, at least initially, my practice sits outside of. This feeling of being outside is productive for me. The process of getting to know and understand the material and conceptual framework of each discipline provides me with cover for as long as I feel like an outsider to it. The feeling is freeing.

Accordingly, I came at writing from an oblique angle that provided me with a ticket out of any situation where my ability or proficiency might be called into question. I'm not a writer, I'm an artist. As a defence mechanism, this displacement activity works both psychologically (tricking myself into overcoming doubt or failure through distance), and practically (having multiple capacities to draw on, should I need to for financial or other reasons, in a pandemic for example).

Having started writing fiction in a contemporary art context, questions around my writing in relation to an established traditional literary form were likely superseded by questions around how it would be 'read' within an exhibition space¹ and in relation to visual media. More than anything else, this consideration gave form to my writing. If it was to operate in this space as something other than supplementary material,² I wanted it to be short, rhythmical, textural or repetitive enough, or suitably fragmentary in style, to be effective in the brief moment that (for the most part) characterises exhibition viewing. Not strictly 'Writing' or 'Art', my work found resonance within the discipline 'Art Writing'.

Art Writing is a relatively new discipline within contemporary practice, which, like many new disciplines, might only need to exist for as long as it takes for it to be

¹ In the broadest sense – that is, acknowledging the wide variety of ways in which artwork can be exposed to an audience.

² While text is almost always found in this context, it is supplementary to the work, such as an exhibition statement, rather than the work itself. This is different in work that uses text and language as a medium for example, work by artists who marshal the standardised aesthetic values of text in pursuit of the de-materialisation of art, or concrete poetry, where graphic imagery made up of words is used to convey meaning.

absorbed into a common discourse around art. Giving it a name, writing about it, pointing to a group of representative practices and developing Art Writing MFA programmes at prestigious international universities, gives it visibility and recognition as a new development outside of more established ways of working.

Many artists write and publish as or alongside their work. The Artist Book is a widely recognised medium, though difficult to define in its varying forms outside of it being understood as a book made by an artist. In many cases, an Artist Book might not contain any writing. Book Arts is a discipline that is concerned with the materiality of books, using existing books or material associated with books as a base. Art Writing is concerned with writing that intersects critical, creative, theoretical and artistic practice:

Art Writing does not take modalities of writing as given; rather it tends to, and experiments with, non-division between practice and theory, criticism and creativity.

...

Art Writing sustains all forms of art criticism, including the experimental and the hybrid. The artwork may be intensely engaged with, or it may be the starting point for fictional and poetic developments.

...

Art Writing addresses material literary forms, which draw attention to the spatiality of writing and the physicality of its support, but the interests of Art Writing diverge from those of literature.

...

Art Writing is re-invented in each instance of Art Writing, determining its own criteria (Fusco 2011: online).

In *11 Statements About Art Writing*, tutors from the MFA in Art Writing at Goldsmiths University, London use Art Writing to describe Art Writing (Fusco 2011). Published in an online contemporary art journal alongside more traditional modes such as reviews, features and interviews, the statements appear mildly experimental. As a series of noncommittal proclamations, they read like placards for an obscure cause. The statements exhibit a baroque form of language that is a pervasive

characteristic of writing in a contemporary art context that does little to recommend the development of the discipline. In spite of this, they signal the desire for a reconfiguration of the relationship between writing and art, which resonates with my own practice.

I'm not sure whether what I'm doing when I write is Art Writing, or whether it needs to be categorised as one or the other, but the framework of Art Writing offers bridge between two key focus areas in my work. The third of the *11 Statements About Art Writing* chimes with my interest in how my work is read, the spaces in which it is read, and, more generally, how people read and how people position their bodies when they read. When I first started writing, I wanted to condition or choreograph the reading of my work within a particular space. So the work extends beyond the writing into a directed or curated performance of reading. I spent time observing readers in different contexts and asking people about their reading habits. I began to look into the area of socio-physiology, that sits somewhere between sociology, psychology and physiology and is concerned with the relationship between society and physical functioning.

In *Reading: A Socio-Physiological Outline*, Georges Perec details common reading postures:

reading standing up (this is the best way of consulting a dictionary);
 reading sitting down, but there are so many ways of sitting: feet touching the ground, feet higher than the seat, the body leaning backwards (armchair, settee), elbows propped on a table, etc.;
 reading lying down; lying on the back, lying on the front; lying on the side, etc. (Perec 1997:179).

Perec continues in this essay to consider the environments in which we read:

Reading isn't merely to read a text, to decipher signs, to survey lines, to explore pages, to traverse a meaning; it isn't merely the communion between author and reader ... It is, at

the same time, the noise of the Métro, or the swaying of the railway compartment ... or the sensation of hot water in the bath, or the waiting for sleep (Perec 1997: 181).

My research into socio-physiology led me to the Mass Observation movement in Britain, which was a large-scale, volunteer-based organisation that attempted to document the daily lives and habits of British people from 1937 into the mid-sixties.

Through diary entries, notes, audio recordings and photographs, Mass Observation volunteers recorded observations of their own and their contemporaries' habits in categories set up by the organisation such as national holidays, neighbours, mealtimes, exercise, work and leisure. These recordings form part of an extensive archive of people's everyday lives at the time. This was exceptional not only in its use of regular people to conduct subjective, observational research but in turning the lens directly on the lives of a nation who had made a habit of scrutinising and categorising the lives and cultures of people in other parts of the globe, namely in British colonies.

An excerpt from the M-O archive describes an unexceptional day taken at random in the life of an engineering worker:

'Quarter to seven.' 'Right.' I stretch and pile out, go to the bathroom and swill, the cold water breezes me up and I feel properly awake, scrub with my towel, pull my vest off and put a sleeveless shirt on ... Part my hair, transfer money, keys, cigarettes and matches from my best suit to my overalls (Harrison & Madge: 1939: 211).

Though Mass Observation was a tangent from my research into readers, it had implications for my writing methodologies and material, which was, and still is, largely based on observations of my own habits and behaviour and that of people around me. The subjective recordings by individuals that make up the Mass Observation archive also made me think about fiction as a form of research, that is, as an openly biased way of understanding or interpreting social behaviour. This, in

opposition to the pursuit of objectivity in research where people are concerned, and the fraught history of such pursuits.

For the purposes of this essay, I'm not interested in trying to classify fiction as research,³ but the complications that arise around objectivity in research that seeks to represent human interactions and behaviour has something in common with what writers of fiction experience, in relation to representation in their work. I have attempted to reckon with these complications in my own writing that makes no claims to objectivity but does borrow detail from my own and other people's lives.

Kundai Moyo is an artist based in Johannesburg whose working process encompasses social research. Moyo poses questions and invites responses from people in public settings around subjects such as love, care and relationships. Responses are generally written down or audio recorded and submitted to Moyo anonymously. She uses this material, as well as her interactions and negotiations with the people she encounters, as the basis for her work, which manifests in artist books, videos and installations of hand written notes.

Moyo's photographic series, *Stranger Studies* documents an experiment she conducted in 2019 in Johannesburg, where pedestrians were approached at random and invited to join each other on public benches for brief interactions. Moyo traced the affective progressions of these encounters with timed photographs. The photographs appear to depict moments shared between lovers and friends in spite of their being the product of a contrived encounter between strangers.

³ Most institutions of higher learning still require a conventionally written, academic accompaniment to creative outputs in order for them to be considered valid forms of research.



Kundai Moyo, *Stranger Studies*, 2019. Photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

Stranger Studies pictures the potential for closeness and intimacy between strangers. What is pictured is not strictly fictional or performed. Moyo draws on unscripted interactions that she has prompted but not directed, projecting a world where mutual acknowledgement is a default between people regardless of their familiarity with one another. Moyo's voice and intentions come through in this way, in spite of her subjects responding of their own accord.

How to Become a Writer from the collection of short stories titled *Self-Help* by Lorrie Moore, self-consciously imagines the effects of deploying material from your own and other people's lives in service of your writing:

Perhaps you are working on a novel and writing down all the clever remarks and intimate personal confessions you hear during the day. Perhaps you are losing your pals, your acquaintances, your balance.

...

You have broken up with your boyfriend. You now go out with men who, instead of whispering “I love you,” shout: “Do it to me, baby.” This is good for your writing (Moore 2009: 633).

To an extent, each of the stories in *Everyone Agrees* is autobiographical. For me, the collection reads as a patchy and erratic chronicle of the past two years of my life. It's not my intention for this to have any bearing on the way in which the stories are received. Their starting points are drawn from aspects of my life and the lives of those around me – family, partners, friends, colleagues and strangers. This material is obscured through the writing process to varying degrees.

In some cases, I have transcribed, almost word for word, a conversation I have had or overheard, for example in ‘Sorry’:

If we go to the car and still can't find it, will you say sorry?

If we go to the car and I find it, will *you* say sorry?

Okay.

Okay.

I overheard this argument between two people who have been together for more than thirty years. Stripped of content and context, the pattern of this conversation felt to me like it could repeat infinitely as a template for a relationship, romantic, professional or otherwise between two people who have known one another for a very long time. It made me think of how abstract conversations between family members, old friends, colleagues or partners can become; how your lives become coded through familiarity. What you say to each other has increasingly little to do with what you mean. In spite of this, you understand each other.

‘OK’ is very nearly a direct transcription of instructions I received when housesitting about how to manage the security system. In each case, I embellished the writing initially, then stripped it down again, until I realised that it required very little intervention outside of it being reframed as a very short story. The familiarity felt

by anyone who has experienced first hand or indirectly the dynamics of knowing someone for a very long time or staying in someone else's home in Johannesburg, is enough to carry the story.

Many of the stories come from notes I've made (some a few years old) of things I've overheard or moments that have struck me in one way or another. 'The Gallery' comes from a note I made in 2016 when I was working as an invigilator in a university gallery. The note was about a man who pulled a napkin filled with almonds out of his pocket. I tried to write about it a few times but the circumstances of the incident felt very particular and I struggled to work out what it was about the incident that might make it a story. I am reluctant to write about experiences in relation to galleries and contemporary art as there are so many clichés that can be played into. There is something distinctively performative about the space of galleries. They are anxious, empty spaces with their own language, where bodies tend to stand out. I wanted the focus of 'The Gallery' to be the man with the napkin, not the gallery itself.

'What She Could' is based on a note I made about a billboard. I don't remember the image but it said, "Chase those pinch-me moments", and it made me wonder about how that directive might play out. I started writing the piece by imagining possible applications of the phrase. I had recently cut my chin open at a wedding. I was reluctant to attend the wedding and the bloody emergency felt like an inadvertent expression of this. The character in 'What She Could' meets a similar end.

One of the references for 'You Need To Ask Yourself' was a meeting I attended where an executive in the company, said, "You need to ask yourself: how can I massage this down?" This was in relation to pricing negotiations in which a purchasing team was being encouraged to bargain down the pricing of goods. The story moved away from this context and into a much more abstract space which I describe in more detail later in this essay.

In the process of writing and editing, the stories quite often move in a very different direction to the note or prompt that I start with. In some cases, it's discarded altogether. Often, I'm unable to move beyond something I've overheard and made a note of, into a story. I've tried several times to find a way to incorporate: "...this duck breast is better than anything you've had in France." I've also struggled to incorporate something I read in an exhibition review about "...the return of the hand, amputated by the digital age." I remain optimistic about "...birds in flight remain of course, the biggest challenge."

Over the lockdown period, my capacity to overhear things or gather experiences outside of my immediate environment was limited, for obvious reasons. Some of what I wrote during this time I drew from interactions on dating apps, namely, 'Golden' and 'The Outdoors'. These stories are more personal and, while in 'The Outdoors' the reference to dating apps is overt, both stories have more to do with me finding a way to process and describe uncomfortable, confusing and occasionally scary interactions, than they have to do with online dating.

I was responding in stories such as 'Glider' and 'Occasionally' to a brief. I work as a writer for artists, writing exhibition texts and artist statements and generally helping artists to articulate their intentions. In some cases, I have been asked to introduce an exhibition through fiction. A few of the stories in this collection have come out of this process, which I will touch on later in this essay.

At times, I have used my writing to reflect or work through things. While writing the stories in *Everyone Agrees* I became interested in how we address difficulty in our lives by talking to people around us, that is, how we speak about our problems. I wanted to have a look at a kind of circularity that I have encountered in myself and in others, where the expression of emotional or physical pain yields a feeling of relief that can be sustained through repetition. I have come to understand

that most of us don't want help or advice when describing our problems, we want to be heard and we want sympathy. At various points in the last few years, I have found myself feeling completely saturated by the emotional material that I have absorbed from friends and colleagues. I have, at these points felt that I have lost my capacity for empathy.

I have explored some of these ideas through stories such as 'Work', where two people compete for how much work they have to do and how tired they are. The story is written from the perspective of the person who is eventually defeated by the other person's workload and subsequent anxiety. 'Tell Me Again' is a catalogue of complaints rehashed by a narrator who has heard them, perhaps several times, already. 'Giulia' is an account of a party where the narrator moves from one character to another as they describe their various personal challenges. The narrator cycles home and is grateful for the rush of the wind in her ears. At another social gathering in 'Glider', a character endures the monologue of an artist bragging about his work and lamenting the fact that he hasn't received more support for it.

In 'The Feeling', a character struggles with emotional exhaustion after having made herself available for people to offload their problems. A martyr, who has sacrificed her own wellbeing for that of the people around her, she nevertheless finds herself having to offload the problems that arise from her having made herself available in this way, to the people around her.

There is meanness in the perspective of these stories that I am wary of. I have attempted to avoid a judgemental or declamatory tone by using a self-reflexive perspective in stories such as 'The Feeling', where the narrator is effectively repeating the behaviour she laments in others. It's important to me that the narrator is made visible in some way.

Rachel Cusk's *Outline Trilogy* (*Outline*, *Transit*, *Kudos*) is made up almost entirely of dialogue between a narrator and the people she meets on a day-to-day basis over a

period of unremarkable time. The character is an interlocutor, who occasionally shares something from her own life, but mostly listens to and prompts monologues from strangers on planes, family, friends, builders, peers, neighbours. At a dinner a woman gives a detailed account of tension in her family following the death of her mother. After some time she addresses the narrator: "...I like it that you ask these questions...But I don't understand why you want to know." (Cusk 2017: 227).

The novels feel very immediate in the way in which they convey the joys and travails of the characters and in communicating the narrator's experience of them. The characters are constructed largely through what they say and so feel less like characters than like people you are encountering as a reader, without introduction, in real time, via the narrator. There is very little description outside of the dialogue to guide a reader towards a particular perspective. The reader is equipped with the knowledge that the situation is being 'described' by the narrator. As such, the description is coloured with a similar bias to what you might experience when listening to a friend's account of a conversation they've had with another person.

For Cusk the narrator's character is not irreproachable or neutral as might be interpreted by the almost exclusive focus on the speech, actions and appearance of the characters she meets. Cusk maintains, "...A person can be described by what they notice." (Cusk 2019: online).

In an interview with Steven Winn, Cusk discusses how she found the form for her novel by turning away from, "...the conventional contemporary novel, which seemed increasingly to disavow any connection to the self and personal experience." (Cusk 2019: online).

She expresses her need "...to experience things in order to know them..." (Cusk 2019: online) and how the *Outline Trilogy*, which is neither narrative, nor autobiographical, is the form she came up with for documenting this process.

...I think this idea of verifying—I think that's what autofiction is doing. It's saying in the end, the only thing morally that I can recognize as true or I can impose my moral being by using myself... it's seen as sort of narcissistic... whereas in fact [it's] completely the opposite of that. It's using yourself. It's almost erasing yourself. It's basically saying I'm going to use myself to prove things about the world (Cusk 2019: online).

Much like Art Writing, Autofiction feels like a term that may no longer be needed, once the practice has gained the visibility required for it to be unremarkable. It describes (broadly) a style of writing that sits between fiction and autobiography. While I could apply this definition to my own writing, it feels unnecessary perhaps, beyond an attempt to position myself in relation to other writers, considering how many writers draw on their own lives in their work in one way or another.

In attempting to contextualise my writing formally within this broad genre of writers whose work considers relationships between people and between people and objects, I am drawn to fragmentary forms as well as very short stories.

The traditional literary forms – the novel, the short story, the poem – although they evolve, do not disappear. But there is a wealth of less traditional forms that writers have adopted over the decades and centuries, forms that are harder to define and less often encountered, either variations on the more familiar, such as the short-short story, on intergeneric – sitting on a line between poetry and prose, or fable and realistic narrative, or essay and fiction, and so on (Davis 2019: 3).

In *Pond*, Claire Louise-Bennett writes feverish fragmentary prose featuring mundane, slightly unsettling daily interactions between a self-absorbed, solitary narrator and her surroundings, hinting at human relationships or the absence thereof:

Stir-Fry

I just threw my dinner in the bin. I knew as I was making it I was going to do that, so I put in all the things I never want to see again (Bennett 2015: 53).

Jenny Offill's novels *Dept. of Speculation* and *Weather* navigate human relationships and the physical world through short contained paragraphs. These are not collections of stories, but each three to five line paragraph captures a different moment or reference, so the full texts are made up of small, self-contained fragments. Offill mobilises banal elements of everyday life to consider larger themes such as the realities of climate change. She is also able to hold the reader's attention by offsetting fragments against one another in development of a coherent line through the novel.

I need to pack for this trip, but there's something buzzing around the room. I can't see it, but I can hear it hurtling itself against the glass. A bee maybe, or a wasp. Over there, on the blinds, I think. I capture it with the aid of a cup and an index card.

Quiet in the cup. Hard to believe that isn't joy, the way it flies away when I fling it out the window (Offill 2020: 29)

Practicalities is a collection of fragmentary pieces by Marguerite Duras that deal with personal and universal subjects with varying degrees of intensity. She considers alcoholism, writing and animals on television in an alternating manner that sits between autobiography, fiction and philosophical musings.

Francis Ponge's minute descriptions of the life of objects (including an entire novel on soap) do not hint at larger themes or messages but thrill in the surface of things, one at a time.

Soap has much to say. May it say it with volubility, enthusiasm. When it has finished saying it, it no longer is. (Ponge 1998: 13).

In *Forms and Influences*, Lydia Davis describes the evolution of her fiction, which, though variable and difficult to categorise, is known for its brevity at between five and a hundred words apiece. Davis felt at an early stage, that her only option as a writer was the narrative short story. She took some time to identify writers whose fiction fell outside of and between the poem, novel or short story and to experiment with and ultimately accept her own writing in all its mercurial forms, "...including what could roughly be described as meditations; parables or fables...a diary about thyroid disease; excerpts from a bad translation of a poorly written biography of Marie Curie..." (Davis 2019: 4).

In *Problem*, Davis uses letters of the alphabet to express a complicated set of relationships. The letters give the set of relationships a universal character, suggesting that X, Y, Z, W, V, W, U and T might be replaced interchangeably with various people's names in a given situation. The individuality of the people involved is diminished and the complicated relationship between them becomes the dominant feature:

X is with Y, but is living on money from Z. Y himself supports W, who lives with her child by V. (Davis 2009: 332).

In *Companion*, Davis personifies her digestion, thinking through bodily detachment:

We are sitting here together, my digestion and I. I am reading a book and it is working away at the lunch I ate a little while ago (Davis 2009: 124).

I was directed to Davis when I first started writing stories. I am an avid reader of almost anything in the short story form but it felt like a revelation to me to find a writer who so boldly and convincingly wrote stories as short as a single sentence.

She also demonstrated in a very particular way: "...that you could derive the material of a story very largely from your own life... or even...almost entirely from your own life." (Davis 2019: 9).

The suggestion was offered, early on in the writing of *Everyone Agrees*, that I should write away from Lydia Davis as an influence on account of her unique mastery of the very short fictional form. My understanding of this advice is that her writing could cast too large a shadow over my work and impede the development of my own voice. I recognised and took the advice, for the most part avoiding her writing until this point of reflection. In attempting to contextualise my writing in a form and style that sometimes seems easier to define by what it isn't, I feel it's important to acknowledge one of its most compelling and prolific voices. Davis's extensive critical writing and reviews on other writers who use this form directed me to a range of techniques and traditions and emboldened me with "...the realisation that I could, with great satisfaction, write fictional stories that were accounts of actual events, only thinly disguised." (Davis 2019: 141).

A few of her references that made a significant impression on me are: Thomas Bernhard's long sentences in *The Voice Imitator*, David Foster-Wallace's visceral observations of human sociality, speech and experience in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and the translation of a traditional Cheremiss⁴ saying that she quotes in *Essays*:

[Untitled] from the Cheremiss, Translation by Anselm Hollo

i shouldn't have started these red wool mittens.
they're done now,
but my life is over (Davis 2019: 296).

⁴ Cheremiss, Cheremis or Mari people are of rural Finnish origin and live mostly in eastern Russia.

I try, wherever possible, not to use long sentences. This is partly out of consideration for the reader. I struggle with sentences that contain a lot of words when I read. It's not that I find the actual practice of reading long sentences difficult, but very long sentences feel to me like an indulgence on the part of the writer. I think sentences need a good reason to be long, that is, for it to be worth my while to get through them. If a sentence is very long on account of adjectives and imagery, I begin to wonder what the writer is trying to make up for. Of course, if the imagery is compelling and meets its subject in a harmonious or seamless way, I probably don't consider the length of the sentence.

Another good reason for a sentence to be long (in my opinion) is if its length or long-windedness is being used to illustrate a character or aspect of the story. That word 'long-winded' is a good descriptor for the relationship between reading and breathing. Like many writers, I read my work aloud in order to get a sense of the rhythm of a text, or to hear where a word or sentence might trip up a reader in an unproductive way. While it's much less common for general readers to read aloud, I think silent readers still experience some version of this. Reading Thomas Bernhard's *Profound and Shallow* feels a little like being pumped full of air. The first sentence is inflated with: 'Academy of Sciences' (mentioned twice), 'world-famous', and 'most important of our time', and runs on for four lines but essentially tells us that a man gave a lecture. In the piece, which is just over a hundred words long, 'Academy', 'French Philosopher' and 'lecture' appear three times. Other phrases are repeated and reshuffled. *Profound and Shallow* is a gassy read, that describes an interaction between pompous academics:

On his way back from Moscow, where he had been the guest of the Academy of Sciences, the world-famous French philosopher who has for decades been called the most important of his time came to Vienna to give the same lecture to the Viennese Academy of Sciences that he had already given in Moscow (Bernhard 1998: 30).

In my own stories, I've tried to use long sentences only when it serves a character or the rhythm of the story. 'Physio' is seven lines, four of which are taken up by one sentence that I hoped would communicate that the main character is a gasbag:

She hoped the physio might recognise that what she really wanted was someone to talk to whose eyes wouldn't glaze over as soon as she got to the part about South Africa being so much more conservative than other parts of the world she'd been fortunate enough to live in.

In 'Baked In', a long sentence is used to express an overly complicated idea:

Has he mastered the appearance of being interested (its postures and sounds) to the extent that he need never know or understand exactly what's being said but can still reap the benefits of being seen to be listening? What? What does his body look like when he is listening or appearing to?

'Baked In' is one of several stories in the collection, in which the presence of an interlocutor is made obvious. It is also a story about listening. I wrote 'Baked In' a few months after an encounter with a stranger in a park on a bench. I'd arranged it as part of my research for a project where I'd been commissioned to respond creatively to an artist's book, *Guitar!* by Sarah Tripp.

Guitar! is a fragmentary narrative whose parts alternate between a child learning to speak, the practice of writing in snatches of available time, images of musicians busking, correspondence between friends and colleagues, and a 'method' that sets parameters for a conversation between relative strangers. In spite of being made up of a range of voices and having little or no narrative line, *Guitar!* is not hard to follow. It reads like a recording, rather than a diary, of the narrator's daily interactions. *Guitar!* returns through the various fragments in barely perceptible ways to the idea of love, kinship and human connection as a feeling of being 'met'.

In formulating my response to *Guitar!* I decided to try out ‘the method’ described in the book, as it played into my interests in conversation and listening. To be clear, ‘the method’ is not instructional in the book, its inclusion is part of the fiction – that is, the book is not proposing that the reader try it out. I chose to follow it as a way of responding to the book. ‘The method’ is outlined in a conversational way, by a person who appears to be talking to someone, expressing their interpretation of ‘the method’. It’s a one-sided conversation (only the speech of this person is included) that suggests that this person has been asked for their opinion:

It’s quite a strange thing, I dunno, finding someone you don’t know. And then, how do you get to know somebody you don’t know? I dunno. Maybe you put some advert out in a newspaper, maybe that’s a bit complicated, maybe it’s just a friend of a friend.” (Tripp 2021: 122).

I found a person who I didn’t know very well but was acquainted with, and convinced him to have a conversation with me in an unpressured environment that discouraged any form of material exchange, such as a bar or a coffee shop. ‘The method’ doesn’t set a subject for the conversation but suggests that you try not to talk directly about personal things, such as your profession, where you live etc. This is not a conversation whose aim is for you to get to know one another. It’s an attempt to have a conversation about conversation, a conversation that excludes all of the things that situate your identity as a person and that make it easier to ask and answer questions. My interpretation of ‘the method’ is as an attempt to get closer to whatever is at the centre (if anything) of human connection. In this way, it is aligned with Kundai Moyo’s *Stranger Studies*. While conducting the conversation with the relative stranger, He and I became subjects of a similar social experiment, mimicking the gestures of two people attempting to connect with one another in an artificial setting.



Kundai Moyo, *Stranger Studies*, 2019. Photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

The conversation was easier to have than I thought it would be, given how contrived the situation was. I didn't end up using it to formulate my response to the book but parts of it did make it into 'Baked In'. The character is a combination of the person I spoke to on the bench and a reflection of my own concerns about practicing a very deliberate form of listening.

I don't think I am naturally a good listener, which I believe some people are, but I aspire to it and value the characteristic in others. Listening has also become an important part of my practice as a writer. It's how I gather most of the material that inspires my writing. So I've thought quite a lot about listening as a practice, as something that can be learned, and wondered about the appearance of it. For example, I've wondered whether a person can tell that you are trying very hard to listen rather than listening because you are interested in what they are saying.

The person on the bench spoke to me about being an only child and how he had to learn to be gregarious in order to draw people into his life. A character in 'Baked In' describes learning to listen and making friends as a function of getting along in the world, rather than as something that he is naturally inclined towards. He

recognises that it is important to relate to people and so has taught himself how. This understanding of the character's behaviour is mostly shaped or directed by his responses to an interlocutor. The interlocutor asks him a series of questions, which he doesn't seem to fully understand but which suggest that the narrator is 'reading' the character.

In 'Baked In', I wanted to think through social behaviour that is learned and how we develop narratives in order to understand or explain ourselves in relation to social norms. I also wanted to raise suspicion around the interlocutor about whom little is revealed outside of their prompts for the character. Why is the interlocutor asking these questions? The level of detail suggests that the interlocutor may have a vested interest in garnering a certain kind of response from the character. The interlocutor treats the character as a subject in the story, mirroring the contrived or constructed interactions that the character is describing. The character may be manipulative and disingenuous in his behaviour by performing a social role, or, psychologically masking social difficulty or anxiety. The interlocutor seems to be trying to guide the character towards particular answers or towards a particular way of seeing himself or being seen.

Listening is a subject that is raised in 'Moon', 'Psychologist' and 'Physio', among others. In 'Moon' the narrator varies her answers to her disinterested lover, who asks her the same question repeatedly and doesn't listen to her responses. 'Psychologist' considers the practice of psychology as a pyramid scheme of listening. In 'Physio', a character visits her physiotherapist in the hope that she might hear her out.

The MA in Creative Writing is perhaps as much an exercise in listening as it is in writing. The intensive seminar format calls for students to consistently exchange roles, giving and receiving feedback. Feedback given to peers can at times be as

useful as feedback directed towards your own work. Finding a way to provide valuable feedback on work that sits outside of your frame of reference or that you struggle to connect with is challenging. I experienced or witnessed this on both sides, that is, when I was tasked with providing feedback and also when I was receiving it. It can be hard to process feedback from someone who is struggling to understand your intentions – to separate what is valuable from what might not be relevant. I found it very hard to provide feedback at times but the reversing of roles enables an immediate form of empathy, perhaps even a forced empathy that eases a sometimes sharp learning curve. This conditioned audience is almost unimaginable in any other situation.

‘Anna’ is a detailed synopsis of an episode from Downton Abbey, though this fact is not relevant to the impression I hoped to create in the piece. I wanted to use the description of the episode to depict a narrator who is deeply sympathetic to the characters in a story, possibly to the point of not being able to separate their own life from the story and its characters. The narrator is only visible in ‘Anna’ insofar as the story is narrated, but their very detailed description of the drama and complication involved in the lives of characters who are referred to by name and given no introduction, points to the narrator’s dramatic entanglement.

‘Anna’ was initially intended as a reflection on the emotional life of actors. I was thinking about how actors process the emotions they so regularly summon as part of their profession, how these emotions register, physically and psychologically. I have had similar thoughts about dreams or nightmares, as I am a very active sleeper. I wonder sometimes, what the long-term psychological impact of emotionally affecting dreams might be, and if it might be possible to assign unexpected feelings or uncharacteristic behaviour to events that have occurred in dreams. I started writing ‘Anna’ from the perspective of the actors:

The colour drains from his face as she describes her love for the other man, how it's enough for her just to know how it feels to love the other man, even if they can't be together.

But after I submitted it to a seminar, it became clear that the story had taken a different direction. 'Anna' became a story about watching TV. My interest in the emotional life of actors, which I struggled to let go of, became another story, *Feelings*, on the advice of one of the supervisors, Phillippa Yaa de Villiers.

In writing these stories, I quite often struggled to see the difference between the image I had in my head of a story, and what I had actually written. The gap was occasionally significant, though it was only made visible to me through the responses of my supervisors and peers. The seminars enabled me to see what made it across and what didn't.

The starting point for 'Story' was a motivational quote about writing that I can no longer remember but that made a reference to Scheherazade.⁵ The implication of the quote (as I remember it) was that every story you write is a version of the same story. In spite of this, you should write as if your life depends on it. At the time, I was attempting to diversify the subject matter of my stories and bring in a wider range of voices.

Throughout the writing of *Everyone Agrees* I have been conscious of the potential for monotony in a collection that draws sometimes very directly from my own life and the social, cultural and professional spaces I navigate. Try as I might to reach beyond its bounds by placing myself in uncomfortable situations and talking to strangers online, this area is inevitably limited. In 'Story', a writer attempts a dramatic change of perspective while seeking direction from an unspecified source on the matter. While 'Story' reflects my own difficulties in writing, it is for the purposes of

⁵ Scheherazade is a character from One Thousand and One Nights (also referred to as Arabian Nights) who manages to save her own life by telling stories to her husband, the King Shahryhar. Following his first wife's betrayal of him, the king resolved to marry a virgin each night and behead her the next day. Scheherazade stops short of her riveting stories each night, forcing the king to spare her life in order to hear more the next night.

thinking about the image of writing that is conjured by motivational quotes, master classes and literature that surrounds writing and how this might translate (poorly) in practice.

In an earlier draft of 'Story' readers in the seminar were thrown off by the reference to Scheherazade and struggled to understand the piece. They were far more interested in the part where the narrator walks in on an orgy at a party, where one of the participants winks at her. I was clinging to the starting point of the piece in spite of the story having gone in a different direction. The feedback I received in seminars enabled me to let go of aspects of the text, which no longer served the story. *Story* became more about a writer struggling to find her voice while reckoning with advice, than about a quote that I had found interesting and wanted to explore.

'Glider', 'You Need to Ask Yourself' and 'Occasionally', were written to coincide with exhibitions. Traditionally, exhibition texts operate as supplements to the work, offering insight through biographical detail on the artist and uncritical analysis. They are known for containing vague, oblique language levered into paragraph-long sentences. They sometimes give the impression of being more concerned with convincing the audience that the work is too complicated for them to understand, than in providing a point of access. I'm interested in how fiction might create empathy between an audience and the work.

I wrote the stories mentioned above as fictional counterparts to exhibitions of work by Michael Taylor, Jeanne Gaigher and Givan Lötzt. The stories are not *about* the work and in some cases only make very oblique reference to an aspect of it. Their function is not to provide a set of reference points or a guide, but to sit alongside the exhibition as a parallel practice that enters the space of the work.

For Michael Taylor, whose figurative paintings have a distinctive narrative quality to them, I wrote 'Glider'. Taylor's exhibition *In the End* includes paintings of

long, loose-limbed social bodies crammed into the frame, and open, people-less landscapes that look like enlarged postcards from holiday destinations very far away. His work expresses a feeling that oscillates between a desire to be close to other bodies and a longing for escape. 'Glider' was written on my return from one of the first parties I'd been to in two years, following the lockdown period. Most of the people at the party were in a similar state of social shock and the atmosphere was one of muffled excitement, elaborate drunkenness and general awkwardness. I wanted to go home as soon as I arrived.

'You Need to Ask Yourself' was paired with Jeanne Gaigher's exhibition *Tango*. In Gaigher's work, bodies, objects and spaces meld into one another. Her paintings are composites of textured and painted materials stitched roughly together. Her palette, of deep yellows, dark reds, fluorescent greens and pale grey-brown makes it appear as if the work is decomposing. I wrote 'You Need to Ask Yourself' after visiting Gaigher's studio, where her slowly dissolving figures echoed a feeling of profound, boredom that I have experienced working as a salesperson. I was also reminded of a feeling of invisibility I've experienced working in the service industry, where your body almost becomes a part of the establishment, functional in the same way as the chairs and the tables. The story moves between two characters: a shop assistant and a man pacing up and down on the phone outside the shop window. As the man paces, the shop assistant begins to melt into the floor. Her body eventually fuses with the floor and she becomes embedded in it.

'Occasionally' was written to accompany Givan Löt's exhibition *Close But Not Too Close*. Löt is interested in tacit knowledge and the representation of spaces of emotional resonance. He works with encaustic wax as a medium to layer abstracted marks. His muddy colours are interspersed with acidic yellows and soft peach tones. The resulting compositions register somewhere between landscape and mindscape.

'Occasionally' is a story about a feeling, sensation or presence that haunts a character. The character struggles to describe the feeling, whose presence sometimes causes extreme discomfort. In spite of this, the character has become attached to the feeling and doesn't want to be rid of it.

I found these stories hard to write but the confusion or difficulty that I experienced was ultimately productive for me. None of the artists commissioned me to write *about* their work. Each of them made it clear to me that they wanted the story to operate independently of their work but alongside it. I was essentially given free reign, but I still struggled with the pressure of writing something that resonated with, but did not attempt to mimic the narrative, reference points and intentions of the work. Where my other stories were accountable only to my own thoughts and processes, these commissions essentially forced me to push the perspective of my writing into an uncomfortable space.

The relationship between a reader and writing is altered in the context of an exhibition. Even when the text is not directly *about* the work, connections are made between the work and the writing, which modify the meaning of both. The process is collaborative. This is a complicated space to write in and one that ties into my concerns as an artist. How does the context in which a story is read affect the meaning of the story? I haven't managed to get any clear answers to this but I am encouraged by an increasing interest in the commissioning of fiction by artists and galleries in the place of dry exhibition texts.

In writing stories to accompany exhibitions, I often use the second person pronoun as a way of closing the distance that alienates viewers from artworks in galleries. This has led me to explore perspective and narration from a psychological angle.

Ethan Kross is an experimental psychologist who maintains that the psychological implications of describing or narrating a challenging experience in the

first person are remarkably different to when the same experience is described in the third person (Kross 2021). According to Kross, the latter creates distance between a subject and their experience that promotes healing or resolution (Kross 2021). Excessive use of the first person singular 'I' encourages negative thought patterns. Referring to oneself in the third person, also known as 'Illeism', is associated with pomposity, the humorous portrayal of arrogance and sometimes idiocy. Used as a distancing technique however, describing personal challenges as if they were happening to someone else, enables a person to process those challenges in a healthier way (Kross 2021).

When editing *Everyone Agrees*, I regularly switched around the perspective from first to second or third, from male to female and back again until I found what I felt was the right voice. This helped me shift the stories away from their starting point, which was often something I'd experienced, witnessed or overheard, but didn't necessarily want to replicate or reimagine. Creating this distance allowed me to see what it was about this encounter that had caught my attention and work through it, relatively undistracted by my immediate feelings about the encounter or concerns about misrepresentation. The result of this was that the story and its characters often found a direction quite apart from the original encounter.

I also noticed that this switching around of perspective had implications for the way in which I processed or understood the various experiences that I was drawing from, when those experiences had personal implications. 'Confrontational' is a story that extends my own attitude towards and experiences with confrontation. Writing in the third person about the subject enabled me to channel my various failed attempts to resolve conflict through confrontation, into the defensive monologue of an unsympathetic character – 'she', not 'I'. I wrote 'Physio', partly in response to my worry that after living overseas, I would return to Johannesburg and spend my time complaining about how much better things were over there. The character is looking for a sympathetic ear rather than physical therapy, having possibly exhausted all her

other options. She is a cliché that I hoped to avoid becoming, by writing her into the story.

I don't mean to suggest that *Everyone Agrees* was a therapeutic exercise. Any psychological benefits that the writing encouraged were purely incidental, but I am interested in the relationships that are created between a writer, a reader and a text according to the perspective employed.

I used the second person perspective in *Everyone Agrees* to various ends. In 'Glider', I used the pronoun 'you' to create a heightened sense of social anxiety. I wanted to bring the reader directly into the space of the story, where an awkward protagonist hovers on the edges of a party, critically observing the revellers at its centre. In 'Occasionally', I used the pronoun to amplify the haunting by an unnamed presence. I experimented with the use of the second person in a different way in 'Outline', though the story is also concerned with a form of self-consciousness or anxiety that the pronoun underscores. The 'you' in 'Outline' refers alternately to a singular and to a plural or general perspective. I use it to implicate the reader in the story but also to suggest that the condition that is being described applies generally, to most people. The condition is that it may not be possible to ever really know anyone, fully, because our inclination to project assumptions or prior knowledge onto a person's character might never entirely disappear.

You (*singular*) are an outline, and you (*singular*) remain that way when you (*plural*) meet. Even after you (*plural*) meet, it could take weeks, years, decades, to be filled in.

The second person can be presumptuous and aggressive in the way that it addresses the reader. As a reader, you become a subject in the narrative and are subject to the whims of the narrator or narrative. You are robbed of the distance between yourself and the narrative and with it, the 'escape' that you might expect from fiction.

My most memorable encounter with this perspective is in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body*. The narrator (Tambudzai "you") endures the torments of poverty, rejection and loneliness. She is bitter and destructive in her treatment of herself and those around her. The book moves from one reprehensible interaction to another and the reader moves with it, feeling Tambudzai's shame and becoming incriminated along with her through the use of the second person. The narrative is both compelling and extremely uncomfortable to read.

The second person is commonly used in self-improvement manuals and literature aimed at inspiring readers in some aspect of their lives. The use of 'you' in this context serves to empower the reader, by making them feel like they are the subject of the narrative, their own narrative. Lorrie Moore exploits this characteristic in her ironically titled collection of stories, *Self-Help*. Several of the stories in the collection are written in the second person and play on the genre of self-improvement to talk about the difficulties of being a human being. In the case of Moore's stories, the second person is inclusive rather than imposing. The 'you' creates a shared perspective that has an almost empathetic effect on the reader, though it doesn't preclude the feelings of hurt, guilt and humiliation that the reader experiences along with the character.

In the television series *How To With John Wilson*, Wilson uses the second person to play on the self-help genre. He documents New York City on a daily basis, drawing on a seemingly endless archive of arbitrary footage of people, animals, cars, bins, signs and food to illustrate his rambling tutorials. They begin by addressing practical subjects like investing in real estate or cooking the perfect risotto. The documentary footage that makes up each episode is sustained by the voiceover. Without this narration, the series would be a jumble of images with at best tenuous connections to one another.

Wilson has an unimposing and easy interviewing style that encourages the people he meets to talk well beyond the subject at hand. A series where the narrator

interviews people in this way runs the risk of portraying those people unfairly when the interviews are directed into a broader picture that serves the aims of the show. John Wilson's use of the term 'you' places the viewer in almost direct relation to the people he interviews. This immediacy creates a closeness that encourages compassion in the viewer by removing distance. The effect is also very humorous, as 'you' negotiate incongruous and awkward situations.

The way in which perspective in a story conditions a reader's relationship to that story and its characters plays into one of my main considerations in *Everyone Agrees*. The slippages that occur between people, and our various and shifting notions of reality is exemplified in a fragment from Sarah Tripp's *Guitar!*:

Your curiosity struck me as vast and you seemed to know,
mostly, you were being misinterpreted and that was that. But
that was not you (Tripp 2020: 136).

'Outline' is concerned with the way in which we project identities and narratives onto one another and how it can be difficult to escape these projections. Other stories, like 'What She Could' and 'Options', consider the narratives we construct about our identities and ourselves. In 'Options' a character expresses his desire to become the person he wants to be, having progressed to a point in his life where he has the capacity and is free to make choices. In 'What She Could', a character's quest for personal fulfilment following the advice of a marketing tagline results in frenzied collapse and injury.

There is a catharsis for me in turning over my experiences through writing, a figuring process that occurs as I write. It's more of a shaping and re-shaping than a figuring 'out', which suggests resolution. Though it hadn't occurred to me before beginning this reflection, the first and last stories in *Everyone Agrees* go some way to

describing what it is that motivates me to write or at least what I've tried to explore in this collection.

The first, 'Archaeologist', issues a directive about projection and archaeological material. How do we know for certain, that knowledge is not just an extension of our beliefs and desires, that when we look to understand something or someone, we are not just seeking out confirmation of our views? 'Outline', the last story, applies this to our relationships with people.

The writing of *Everyone Agrees* strikes me alternately and simultaneously as an exercise in validation, empathy and as the externalising of my own personalised version of reality.

References

- Bennett, C. 2015. *Pond*. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions.
- Bernhard, T. 1998. *The Voice Immitator*. Translated by Kenneth J. Northcott. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cusk, R. 2019. Conversation with Steven Winn on 8 April 2019. *City Arts & Lectures*. Transcript. Online. <https://www.cityarts.net/event/rachel-cusk/>. 4 January 2022.
- Cusk, R. 2017. *Transit*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Cusk, R. 2014. *Outline*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Cusk, R. 2019. *Kudos*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Dangarembga, T. 2018. *This Mournable Body*. South Africa: Jacana.
- Duras, M. 1990. *Practicalities*. Translated by William Collins. New York: Grove Atlantic.
- Davis, L. 2019. The Practice of Writing. *Essays*. London: Penguin, pp. 3-64.
- Davis, L. 2019. Writers (2). *Essays*. London: Penguin, pp. 281-321.
- Davis, L. 2019. The Practice of Writing (2). *Essays*. London: Penguin, pp. 141-226.
- Davis, L. 2009. *The Collected Short Stories of Lydia Davis*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
- Foster-Wallace, D. 1999. *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. New York: Little Brown.
- Fusco, M. 2011. *Frieze*. 11 Statements Around Art Writing. <https://www.frieze.com/article/11-statements-around-art-writing>. Online. 8 January 2022.
- Harrison, T. & Madge, C. 1939. *Britain by Mass Observation*. London: The Cresset Library.
- How To with John Wilson*, 2020. Television Series. Directed by J. Wilson. USA: HBO.
- Kross, E. 2021. *Chatter: The Voice in Our Head (and How to Harness It)*. New York: Crown.

- Moore, L. 2009. Stories from Self Help (1985). *The Collected Stories of Lorrie Moore*. London: Faber & Faber, pp. 535-635.
- Moyo, K. 2019. *Stranger Studies*. Photograph. Courtesy of the artist.
- Offill, J. 2014. *Dept. of Speculation*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Offill, J. 2020. *Weather*. London: Granta Books.
- Perec, G. 1997. *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*. Translated by John Sturrock. London: Penguin.
- Ponge, F. *Soap*. 1998. Edited by Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery. Translated by Lane Dunlop. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Ponge, F. *Selected Poems*. 1994. Translated by Margaret Guiton, John Montague and C.K. Williams. New York: Wake Forest University Press.
- Tripp, S. 2020. *MAP Magazine*. Part 5: The Self-Illuminating Pen. <https://mapmagazine.co.uk/part-5-the-self-illuminating-pen>. Online. 5 January 2022.
- Tripp, S. 2020. *Guitar!*. London: Book Works.