

## Massey University

## Thom Conroy

## American Cancer

### Abstract:

Pondering his return to New Zealand after eighteen month's absence, the narrator of *American cancer* reflects on the unexpected humanity he finds in ordinary life in his newly re-adopted country. At the same time, he reveals his own subjectivity in a way that suggests insight without binding comprehension and self-reflexivity without postmodern fanfare. Loosely based on my own experience and yet cast in terms that highlight a fabricated consciousness, *American cancer* attempts to write time as it passes, transforming the reality of autobiography into an immersive fictional experience.

### Biographical note:

Thom Conroy is an American fiction writer living in New Zealand and teaching creative writing at Massey University. His historical novel *The naturalist* was published in 2014. His next novel *The salted air* will appear in 2016. His short fiction has appeared in a variety of journals in the United States and New Zealand, including *New England Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Kenyon Review*, *Agni*, *Sport*, *Landfall*, and *Colorado Review*. His short story 'The evening's peace' was noted in *Best American Short Stories 2011* as a 'Distinguished Story of 2010'.

### Keywords:

Fiction – America – New Zealand – autobiographical fiction

1.

There was something about my son's eyes I did not trust. On the flight across America yesterday, both he and his sister had behaved in the ordinary, harrowing fashion. She had complained and second-guessed my every decision, pontificating about minutiae and, when the two of us were alone, holding my hand in and staring at me in what struck me as forthright pity. Back at the airport in Philadelphia she had confessed she believed our family was doomed. *Cursed*, that was the word she used. I told her that this was not true, that if anything we were *blessed*, but I heard something hollow and unconvincing in my own voice in spite of the fact that, in part at least, I believed this was true.

My son spent much of that long flight across America on the floor of the aircraft declaring he didn't care about my promise that this flight would soon be over (which was, in fact, a lie), that he didn't want any of the sour cream potato chips or pita bread I had bought in-flight, that he didn't want to go back to his homeland, that he had no interest in the free movies and games on the upcoming Air New Zealand flight across the Pacific Ocean – that, in fact, he *hated* movies and games and food – that all he wanted was to die and, accordingly, his intention was to bash open the window in the seat beside me – occupied now only by crumbs, bits of plastic, the stiffened end of an uneaten sandwich – and leap out, land in a shallow lake, and swim back to his mother.

'I thought you wanted to die,' his sister Ada said.

'Look,' I said to my son. As I spoke, I was holding both his ankles in one hand to restrain him from kicking the seat in front of us. 'I know you miss your mom—'

'I *hate* my mom.'

'You don't hate your mom.'

'I hate her, and I hate *you*.'

'You don't hate her. You don't hate *me*.'

And so forth. But this was to be expected. This was what had also happened the year before when we had returned to America, leaving, New Zealand behind, presumably forever. Of course, we did not put it to my son this way at the time. And now here we were, a year later, on our final flight of the long return journey, skimming the cloud cover with the Fiji-like peak of Taranaki rising untouched and patched in snow and greystone, standing there just to our right as if we could walk across a few kilometres of cloud and touch it. In fact, this was the impression that I had and, for a passing second, it seemed perfectly plausible. I saw myself walking across the cloud, my children on either side of me and, one by one, the other passengers all disembarking onto the cloud, their faces open with wonder. My daughter was sleeping with a book open on her lap – some useless young adult paperback that, when asked, she would describe as 'oh *sooo* good' or 'the best thing she had ever read.' But this, too, was as it should be: routine. Not that I was a devotee of routine. In fact, it be fairly claimed that my abhorrence of routine had sabotaged the lives of my family. And yet, on an

occasion like this, it offered a baseline, a means of assessing the situation which, I understood fully, might soon devolve even further.

Now, on this final flight of four, my son sat in the window seat beside me with his notebook open for the first time during our travel – I had forgotten Sam had packed it – with his head bent over some sketch of bullets, lasers and plumes of smoke. It was drawing as a form of play, pure process – exactly as I had drawn until I was his age, and even years older than he was now. This drawing on my son’s lap might have been from my own childhood. It struck me as more or less identical, right down to the pressure of the lines on the page. *So firm*. Straight, sharp strokes of ink. These strokes were partially what drew my attention to the masked intensity of my son’s current state. I knew the other people on the small, twenty passenger plane were unaware of my son’s presence. Or, if they had walked past us, lurching down the aisle – the turbulence had been mild but consistent, a constant bucking that made me aware of the size of the plane and the buffeting expanse of the atmosphere – they had merely seen a small boy, hair moulded with dried sweat, but sweet enough looking. He was drawing silently, wasn’t he? What more could be asked of him?

But when I had tried to help Carver blow his nose a few minutes before, my son had turned to me to tell me to stop in a tight, enraged voice. What he said was *to leave him the hell alone* and, in the instant of eye contact that occurred, I discerned the rage in him. *An unspoiled black jet*. I knew this rage, and the truth was I feared it. Carver knew that I feared it as well, and this only emboldened him. But, then, I was aware he knew that I knew and this, in turn, emboldened me. As is not unusual, we were locked in a competition for authority which he would inevitably win, and I think both of us understood this. Not that such things mattered now. What mattered now was to keep him in check, to keep him quiet for the remaining ten minutes or so of our final flight back to New Zealand. Here we were at last: the last leg of nearly thirty-six hours of flights, connections, and lay-overs which would return us to a land we had deserted – *forsaken* was how my daughter Ada had described it – thirteen months prior.

When we touched down, Ada awoke and, still blinded by the sun off the tarmac, she said, ‘It looks different.’

I didn’t think anything looked different in the least. Cows and bright green paddocks surrounded the low, grey, decidedly 80s-looking regional airport. The same line of green-grey low hills stood behind everything, promising some modicum of wilderness, but delivering, I knew, only back section sheep farms and thin stretches of possum-ravaged bush. Not wilderness, not, at least, *American* wilderness.

‘What looks different?’ I said.

She gazed at the long stretch of patched-up tarmac, almost blinding white in the sun, seeing something I certainly could not. ‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘It’s just changed.’

I didn’t say anything, but I hoped she was right. More than anything else, I needed her to be right. I needed something – anything, really – to have changed.

## 2.

Inside waiting for us was Pieter. Pieter was perhaps the most unlikely welcoming party we could have arranged, and yet he lived in the same village where we had purchased a large and very old house based entirely on the photos from a realty website. Or, it might be more accurate to say that *I* had purchased the house based on these photos. I had contacted the realtor, I had pored over the descriptions that had been mailed – a thick wad of useless pages rushed across the world in what I believe must have been the realtor’s exuberance at interest in a property she confessed to me on the phone had been on the market for *quite some time*. A pointless expense, that package of the realtor’s, since my mind had already been made up. I had seen the photos on the website and I had found the house on Google Earth. I really needed to know nothing more. The place met all our criteria. Or, rather, all *my* criteria, since Sam seemed to want to know as little as possible about the entire undertaking that was depleting our life-savings and the sum we had recently inherited.

I had been satisfied with the house, and I held onto this feeling of satisfaction as Pieter caught my eye amid the crowd of farmers, soldiers, and local businessmen in their tight, white shirts. I felt my eyes meeting Pieter’s, and I thought about how I had been prepared to pay the asking price for this house but how I had refused to, since the agent had let her guard down and told me how long the place had been on the market. Carver was pulling at my shirt as I pushed my way through the small crowd of large-gutted men and women. And then, in that way that it does, I felt everything at once, and all of it at cross-purposes, all of incongruent and unrelated. I felt Carver’s fingers through my shirt and I began to think of my son’s life, all of it. In less than a second I saw him as a baby and then as a toddler running across a patch of yellow grass, and then as he was just before we left for America, his hair nearly over his eyes as he stood in the driveway of our previous house. Even as I saw these images in my mind, I felt his hands and imagined his sticky fingers. During this same fleeting moment of thought, I saw Pieter approaching, and thought, simultaneously, of how I had haggled with the realtor on the phone over the house. It suffused my face with pride to think of my experience with the realtor. At the same time, some of this pride must surely have come from the memories – I think they were memories – of my son as a baby and a toddler. During this very same moment of pride, I caught a glimpse of myself – my face more bloated than I would have imagined possible – on the chrome pillars in the small and freshly-painted lobby.

In the next moment – again, these thoughts came and went in much less than a second – I understood that I was proud for another reason. I was proud because I knew I had haggled with the realtor for the benefit of my wife Sam. Saving money – or, even better, earning it – was one easy way to stimulate her affection for me, and I was always on the hunt for some way to stoke love between the two of us, not only between us, but between myself and anyone else I needed to feel something with. Love, it sometimes seemed to me, was the only emotion I was interested in. It was love or nothing with everyone. But, then, perhaps this feeling was not love, properly speaking, but something else. Some open-ended yearning I always felt toward the world. What this it? I didn’t know, it occurred to me. I didn’t understand at all, though

this feeling was primal and composed some part of my identity I thought of as fundamental.

Now Pieter had reached me in the small airport crowd. We were not close friends, I thought. We were acquaintances, or maybe our relationship belonged somewhere in that wide but often unacknowledged territory between acquaintanceship and friendship. We had seen each other socially more than ten times but less than twenty, though he had once stayed overnight at our house back when we lived in the regional centre where this airport was located. Maybe five years ago, he and I had been out with a group of men, none of us close friends, and we had been drinking. Pieter had decided he could not drive the twenty minutes back to his house in the same village where my family and I would now live. On this night five years ago, we had walked home to my house together, our hands in our pockets, our coats done up in the Southern Hemisphere winter. The shiny bits of all the stars over us. I didn't remember much of this walk, but it was this walk that had brought Pieter here today to meet us, I thought as I stepped toward Pieter. Or, rather, he might have met us otherwise and given us a lift back to the village where we would now live, but he would not have had the same intensity in his eye and he would not have pulled me so close to him, into the bitter smell of cigarettes that surrounded him.

I inhaled deeply as he held me against his jacket. The smell was acrid, but I had once been a smoker, and the scent of tobacco still incited in me a deep desire to begin smoking. The entire routine of it flashed through my mind as Pieter held me against his thin, strong frame, the buying of the cigarettes, the exorbitant price of them in this country, the purchasing of a new lighter, the package in my hands, the papery filter between my lips.

Now Pieter was bending down to Carver, who turned away from him and told me he had to go the bathroom. My son's behaviour was forthrightly rude, but he was, I thought, still young enough to get away with it. I saw Pieter tuck his hands into his armpits and start talking to Ada. I nodded to them both and said I would be right back. In the bathroom, Carver managed to find a cause for an outraged yell. The door of the stall into which we squeezed – at six, nearly seven, he would not consider entering a stall alone – did not lock.

'It's broken,' I said.

'Hold it closed!' Carver commanded.

I considered reminding my son he could not order me about in this way, but I knew the circumstances did not allow it, not now. He was hungry, beyond exhaustion, and coming down with an illness. I had nothing left to bargain with. There was nothing with which I could threaten him, and we were ten or fifteen long hours past any hope of reasoning. When he was finished peeing, as he tried to push past me, I knelt and hugged him. I kissed his cheek. Why had I done this? I was aware that his response might very well have been to begin screaming or to simply push me away but, to my surprise, my son kissed me back. His eyes were now pink and watery. He was deeply fatigued. Beyond fatigued. I had a passing glimpse of him walking beside me on the cloud outside the plane and, thinking this, I felt a well of tenderness toward the boy.

‘How long is it to our new house?’ Carver said.

‘Not long.’

‘How many minutes?’

I knew he would count the minutes on the watch his grandfather had given him before we left. I said, ‘It’s about ten minutes. Maybe fifteen.’

He said, ‘Is it exactly fifteen?’

I pushed open the door. ‘Fifteen or so, yes.’

‘Then you mean twenty,’ he said. He knew me, it occurred to me, much better than I would ever know him.

### 3.

We were perhaps fifteen minutes outside the regional centre, climbing into the foothills of the ranges I had seen from the tarmac, winding our way across a network of small rivers where the water appeared to run deep black between the green paddocks on either side. Here and there we drove under a high, clay cliff which looked to me in the bright, flat winter sun as if it was drawn in chalk. The wind pummelled the car whenever we emerged out of a small patch of forest – but, I thought, I must remember to call it *bush* here – or out of the circuitous, backtracking valley of one of the insignificant waterways we were crossing. It was here, amid this strange and also familiar landscape where it occurred to me that our house would be empty. Half of a shipping container of our possessions was on its way, but it would not be here for a week or so, and I was taking my family to a completely empty house to live.

But, then, it was not entirely empty. What was in there, though, I did not know. I smiled as I thought of the arrangement I had agreed to. The former owner of the house, an elderly lady, apparently, a Mrs. Colyton, had asked to store some of her things in the house for a while. *How long is a while?* Sam had asked when I got off the phone with the realtor. The fact was that it had never occurred to me to ask this question. Sadly, this was my most basic mode of operation: almost nothing ever occurred to me. *What sorts of things does she want to store?* Sam asked. Ah, the practical questions, I had thought. Sam almost always began with them, and I almost always raced past them. But I had agreed to this arrangement with Mrs. Colyton, and I had agreed immediately without acquiring any of the necessary – and, of course, obvious – information, merely because I was enamoured with the fact that such things were still possible: ordinary arrangements between ordinary people. It was a small thing, maybe, but it moved me. I remember what I had thought when I hung up the phone: *humanity persists*. And, it occurred to me sitting beside Pieter, humanity was not rare. On the contrary, humanity was ordinary. Goodwill was natural, went unnoticed. Nobody spoke of it or cherished it.

Thinking this, I felt a little better about my life, about the world, the future of my children. Humanity persisted and it might thrive in the face of greed. But, no, I thought almost immediately, it would not thrive in the face of greed. It might have an

occasional resurgence, I thought, but it would not thrive. Still, at least the situation was nuanced, I thought, second-guessing myself again. Perhaps my children would come to find an oasis of humanity somewhere in the otherwise inhumane future I often found myself imagining. I pictured them, then, sitting on lounge chairs in this fantastic futuristic oasis of humanity. I was being tongue-in-cheek with myself, of course, and yet I was not being entirely tongue-in-cheek. For me, irony always had a certain soft edge to it that I knew it did not for others. This saddened me somehow: the hardness some people associated with irony. Irony could be wielded like a weapon, a way of sticking it to people, as often happened in satire, but it could be gentle as well. Something accomplished in the spirit of a light-hearted joke. This was my sort of irony, I thought, that kind which was not entirely sincere in its intention to reveal the gap between one kind of knowledge and another. It was irony, I thought, that was also ironic about itself.

#### 4.

Pieter lived in the village of Geneva where we would soon live, and he knew the region quite well. He did not drive us through the village centre, then, as I might have done, but approached our house from a back route I had never taken, following a road across a tableland that looked down on the small, dark-roofed houses of Geneva from some distance and then, at a right angle, turned toward the ranges, climbed up amid paddocks and steep bush-clad slopes briefly before winding down toward the village. At the crossroad that lead to the village, he braked and turned left into a steep and unkempt gravel drive with a precipitous stream running along the right-hand side of it.

‘Is this it?’ Ada asked. She sounded as amazed as I felt.

The stream ran alongside the driveway on one side. On the other a slope was dotted with stunted, untrimmed trees and the terraces of overgrown flowerbeds.

When Pieter reached the top of the incline, I drew in a quiet gasp.

‘It’s a castle,’ Carver said.

‘Jah,’ Pieter said. He whistled. Then he began telling us what he knew about the place, about the people who had built it in New Zealand’s not so distant colonial era, about how the house was one of three that the family had built in the three corners of Geneva. One, he said, had burnt down.

As interested as I was in this speech, I found it hard to pay attention. Arriving now at a place I could call my own after having lived for so long in the homes of others, I felt my body wilting in anticipation of some privacy. I was exhausted, and my capacities for listening were good and truly spent. After a good, long rest they would return, but as Pieter drove between what had once been boxy English gardens, I found it hard to concentrate. I glanced at the gardens with the spiny branches of their white roses.

Just beyond the gardens was the house. It was exactly what I imagined, or close to it: a fading villa with missing balusters on the front veranda and black windows on the side where the driveway turned and meandered, as if distracted, until it petered out amid the knee-high grass several meters before it arrived at the many-paned windows

of the garage. One of the dormer windows in the flat above the garage was broken, and its edge formed a prism that sparkled. I saw the colours of it falling across the long grass, an unexpected shimmer of a rainbow.

‘What a place.’ Pieter said, as if maybe I had given him the wrong address.  
‘This is it?’

‘I suppose it is,’ I said.

‘I thought you lost your job,’ Pieter said.

This comment did not sound as chatty and humorous as he intended it to, and I could tell he was probing for an explanation. I was in no mood to offer one now, and so I simply began struggling my way out of the passenger seat. Once I was standing, I turned back to Pieter and saw he was still looking at me. He wanted a genuine answer to his question, this much was obvious. But I was determined to let the exchange end where it had. Now my daughter opened the back door of Pieter’s car and walked up to a rusty stain that was sprinkled down the weatherboard of the house. She touched it, almost as if to see if it were there.

‘Jah, well, you have much to do here,’ Pieter said, laughing in a way that struck me as affected. He pointed to a sickly-looking lemon tree. ‘Give that one some Neem oil.’ Then, a sort of afterthought, he said, ‘And you must come tonight and eat with us!’

I opened my mouth to reject the offer, though I understood that I could not reject it. And yet there was no question that the offer itself was inappropriate. Like mostly everyone you met in New Zealand, Pieter and his family had travelled internationally on many occasions, and he would be perfectly aware of how profoundly depleted we would be. Of how little any of us were suited to a dinner with anyone.

‘Thanks, Pieter,’ was all I said. ‘What time?’

Pieter laughed, this time with a true gusto. ‘Given your condition? Better make it early.’

## **Research Statement**

### ***Research Background***

Current trends in autobiographical fiction, such as in Karl Ove Knausgaard’s work, have employed a new scrutiny in recasting the pedestrian. Work such as Knausgaard’s *My Struggle* series eschews conventional plot and devotes what might be called ‘excessive’ attention to quotidian or ‘irrelevant’ details of characterisation. The research question centres on how to craft such prosaic and seemingly trivial details work in conjunction with an intentionally flattened or casual prose style to create the impression of fiction being constructed without artifice out of the moments of an unmediated ‘ordinary’ reality.

### **Research Contribution**

My in-progress novel *American Cancer* addresses the subject of the quotidian in contemporary fiction in a way that employs what I call ‘flattened irony’ and a kind of

self-reflexivity that eschews the turn toward the postmodern. The novel also addresses issues of home, belonging and cross-cultural identity. Finally, *American Cancer* attempts to write time as it passes, transforming the reality of autobiographical moments into an immersive fictional experience.

### **Research Significance**

The significance of this research is in its recasting of autobiographical fiction in a moment-by-moment structure that attempts to recreate the nuances, contradictions and instability of consciousness itself. Referred response to the work for 20th annual AAWP conference included recognition for its engagement ‘in terms of character construction and thematic development’ as well as an overall endorsement for its thoughtful construction and the intensity of the reading experience it creates: ‘it’s a thoughtfully constructed piece, stylistically complex and very well-executed, an intense and quite immersive reading experience’.