

Southern Cross University

Gyps Curmi

Kelly 4 Shannon 4eva more

Abstract:

The Great Divide between the eastern seaboard and small inland towns can be as much cultural as geographical. While major cities take fibre-optic communications for granted, in Barraba, for example, one is lucky to get any reception at all. Cultures can stagnate in isolation, often perpetuating vilifying attitudes – ghosts of the past – towards ‘difference’. Trans* theory is also informed by the past, and contemporarily, the intersectionality of other complex identities. *Kelly 4 Shannon 4eva more* adds to this growing body of work through its representation of one regional protagonist’s story, though it does not purport to speak for all trans* experience or identities, or even to trouble cis normativity. It is a Young Adult (YA) tale: framed in a subverted Hero’s Journey, where the past ever-haunts the present, in the search for identity and belonging. A love story and its trajectory; the journey within and the return ‘home’, transmogrified. Outwardly, it is one of physicality: moving from one place to another and back again, but also, from one body to another. A regional coming-of-age story, seeded in, and haunted by, personal experience and also by the shades of sliding door possibilities.

Biographical note:

Gyps Curmi is a PhD creative writing student at Southern Cross University. Ze has a background in visual arts, education and cultural studies. Zir work examines the multiple intersections of being that inform agency and resilience. In zir PhD thesis, Gyps extends these themes by imagining respectful relationships with all sentience through a coming-of-age speculative fiction novel written in gender-neutral language.

Keywords:

Regional Australia – trans* theory – intersectionality – YA- hero’s journey

Sydney's alright, but I miss Kelly real bad. I've tried ringing, but her old-man always answers and bullshits she isn't there. Maybe things will change when my voice does.

I'm staying at Twenty10 refuge. The other kids, and workers too, are pretty cool. But I'm still looking over my shoulder, can't seem to break that old Barraba habit. Hard to believe I'm safe or that I'm not the only one like this. Mostly they're gay and been kicked out of home. City kids in designer label haircuts and the latest smart phones, woosing on about bindi-eyes. I should've brought some catheads with me and stuck them in their sheets. Then they'd know what a prickle is.

The workers gave me a phone, with credit even, but Kelly doesn't get reception.

There's a few here like me. Mostly m2f, but there's another f2m, and one of the workers, too. I even know there's a name for people like me who didn't get born in the right body. I'm trans. Female-to-male. Braden says I don't have to change anything to be a transman. He hasn't. But I do. I don't want anyone thinking I'm a girl anymore. Kelly doesn't care that I'm short, but some here say you grow more on T. I hope so. Can't wait to start transitioning, for my body to show who I am inside.

I thought it'd be easy. But there's all sorts of doctors you've got to see. All judging you. What if they say no?

One worker said he'd come with me when I go. Maybe I should let him. But I've always done things on my own. Like my dad. I've never done anything this big before though. Jae's good to talk with, too. Knows what it's like for me, 'cause it was the same for him.

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You know there's some things you can't ever reverse, Shannon.

Yeah, I know. I can't take my eyes off Jae's Adam's apple. One of the irreversible things I'm busting to have. I run my hand over my own smooth throat.

That's all the doctors want to be sure of, eh? That you won't regret the confirmation treatments. That they're doing the right thing by you. Jae's fingers rasp through the dark stubble on his chin.

I wonder about his own decision. Was it hard for you?

Nope. I always knew. And I've never regretted my decision. It never felt like a *choice*. Jae's smile is a sunburst.

My own grin splits wide-open, 'cause that's just how I feel.

Mind you, I could've done without this! He rubs the bald spot on his head and we both laugh.

Did you're voice break and go all squeaky? Did all the zits come back? How was it, watching your body change? Yep, the Split Rock dam just burst, flooding him to near drowning, with all my bottled up questions.

Whoa. Slow down, brother. He holds up his hands in mock defence.

Brother. Cool! He just called me brother.

The hardest part, was for my parents. Losing the daughter they never-really-had and gaining a second son. But, they're okay now. Accepting of me and whoever I bring home.

Wow. I can't imagine that. Fantasy: *Barraba Gazette* Headlines. Transman, Shannon Saunders, Welcomed Home with Open Arms More like, Take up Arms, Open Fire! But I *will* go back. To get Kelly. I promised. And nothing's changed there, except me, I guess.

I can't let myself think that far ahead, though, or I won't be able to bear staying away. Doing what I need to do.

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Its nine months now since I started on T. I stroke my happy trail. Knowing why they call it that, 'cause that's how I feel most of the time. Walking 'round with this silly idiot grin on my bum-fluff face.

The doctors were full on, but Jae's support helped heaps.

I love how I've muscled up, working out. No-one sees me as anything but male anymore and I feel so comfortable in my skin.

I have a job detailing cars and I've nearly saved enough for top surgery. Got my Ps too. I hope the yard will sell me one cheap, when I'm ready to go.

Missing Kelly is a blunt fulltime ache these days. It's been hard with no contact. Can't even write 'cause it won't get past her old-man. I wish I could teleport there and back again. Just to see her. Touch her. Tell her I think of her all the time. That it won't be long 'til I come for her. It better be soon, 'cause even my memory of Kelly's getting blurry. Wish I had a photo. But maybe the ache would wake into something worse.

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Ready mate? Jae's at my door.

Hang on. I've been saying goodbye to my boobs in the mirror. I actually feel a bit sad. Dunno why, 'cause this is the day I've been dreaming of. There's no understanding feelings sometimes. I tug on my binder, push my boobs into place, then throw on my T-shirt and jeans. I stand sideways, running my hands down the smooth line of my chest. After today, it'll be legitimate. No more binding. Ever.

Ready. my voice is deeper than Jae's. So far, so good with my head hair, too. I'm not thinking about the actual surgery though, 'cause I felt queasy just watching a doco on it.

Jae's frowning. Waiting for some cue from me.

Let's do it. I high five him and he grins.

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It looks fucking awesome!

I left work after top surgery. Though the boss gave me such a good deal on the wagon, I got inked as well. I love it, walking shirtless down the street, people sneaking a look

at the tattoo. The phoenix's fiery wings spread right across my chest covering the scar. It's got its head nestled between my pecs, but looking up. Fierce. Like it's got purpose with that strong upbeat of its wings, and its long blazing tail rising from the flames of my happy line.

The only thing missing is Kelly. It's eighteen months, maybe, I've been away and I can't wait to see her. Can't wait for her to see me. But now it's almost time to go, I keep putting it off. I'm a bit scared of looking at why though. What I might find if I look too close.

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Reckon it's time mate. We'd have moved you to a half-way house if you were staying in Sydney. Jae's looking at me over his mug at the kitchen table. Not frowning, just looking. Telling me like it is. Chucking me out. I'm just glad there's no-one else around to see it.

Yep. Well, I'll get goin' then. The words come out stiff and gruff, but honestly, I feel ready to blubber. I push off the table. Turn to go. Jae reaches out, stopping me with a hand on my arm.

I don't mean now, Shannon. It's just time to think about it.

Good a time as any. I hear my voice snapping, but can't help it. I clench my jaw to fight down bile, and feelings, and hold them down. This is something I'm used to. Good at. I pull my arm out of his grip.

Shannon. Wait. What's coming is the hardest bit. I know. I went through it too. Going back to the people who knew me most, before I transitioned.

He's looking at me, sympathy brimming in his eyes, and it just about undoes me.

What if Kelly doesn't recognise me? Or like me anymore ... like this? My voice is so whispery I don't know if Jae can hear it. I'm talking to myself as much as him. There's stupid snail-trails on my face, drips catching in my stubble. I give them a swipe, in a pretending-they're-not-there kind of way.

Well, you'll never know, if you never go ... you don't have to though. There's room in our halfway house if you want to stay. You'd be welcome. Jae tugs on his goatie. If you want, we can find a place for both of you...

I shake my head, I couldn't imagine ever wanting to come back to a city, but it's nice Jae's offering. Knowing there's somewhere to come back to if things don't work out makes it seem a bit less scary. I'm even feeling excited again to see Kelly. A bit sad, too. Jae's been the best support anyone's ever been, except for Kelly.

Stay in touch, bro. If you want. Let me know how things go. And ring me on that phone if you just want to talk, or whatever. We both stand up and do that awkward man hug thing. And then, fuck it, I pull him close and give him a proper hug.

I'll miss you, man. I can feel myself blushing, but it's all good. It's alright for a man to show he cares.

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I feel joy rising up in me, just like that phoenix on my chest. Tamworth. Shit. Just a couple more hours. I'm nearly home. Whatever that is. The only thing 'home' about Barraba was Kelly. Home is where the heart is, I guess. Like that old song.

Patsy, the wagon, hasn't missed a beat. She's just purring along the highways, slick as. I'm going to make myself eat something at the Golden Guitar even though I'm not hungry. Me and Kelly used to come here sometimes, 'cause she loved country music. People used to recognise us too. So I'm testing it out. To see if I pass. See if they recognise me.

There's this dude behind the counter. Tim on his badge. He always used to curl his lip when he served us. I went up to him especially. But he's not even batting an eyelid. Just gave me a ticket, took my money and said, thanks mate.

Sweet!

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I'm on Fossiker's Way. That burger's sitting like a lump of asbestos out of Woodsreef mine. I'm so nervous I think I'll heave it. I've got a galaxy of plans. Just can't decide on which one. And all the time, niggling away, there's this little voice telling me Kelly isn't gonna like what she sees.

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Yep, I admit it. I'm gutless. I drove straight through town, out the other side and up to the lookout. I guess I hoped Kelly might be walking down Queen Street. But she wasn't.

Here at the lookout, I can see the whole town. There's the bowlo, and I figure out Kelly's place from there. Now I'm here, I'm aching so deep. I just gotta see her. I'm watching her front yard, hoping for a glimpse, but there's only her old-man forking up catheads. He cares more about his bloody lawn than Kelly, or her mum. School's not even out for a couple hours. Time to shower and change. Work out what to do.

I call by my old house first, off Railway Street. Looks the same as when I left, except for the guttering hanging off, more smashed windows and some fading gaffitti: GO HOME WOG DYKE. And the mailbox spewing junk. Stuck to the back of one is a water-damaged postcard from mum. A cane-field lit up at night. Mackay. No wonder I couldn't find her in Sydney. Not that I tried really. Went to La Valette once, a Maltese social club out at Blacktown, but chickened out at the door.

I poke through the junk-mail again, hoping for a note from Kelly. Nope. Can't quite make myself go inside. Too many ghosts.

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I feel like a stalker. Sitting a hundred yards from the top gate.

Then my heart's flapjacking all over the place 'cause there she is. My mouth's gone dry and I gotta pee. Bad. I can hardly breathe she looks so good.

I'm watching through my rear-view. She comes closer and I see she don't look so good after all. Got a hang-dog look about her I've never seen before. Something's

wrong. Her eyes are all puffy and there's fresh bruises on her arm. Is her old-man beating on her as well as her mum? I'll fix him, the prick.

She's scuffing past and I know I've got to say something.

Kelly. My voice comes out squeaky. Too quiet to hear. Kelly! That's better. She looks, but through me and keeps walking, faster. I start up Patsy and crawl along beside her. Now I totally am a stalker. Kelly. It's me. Shannon. This time she looks right at me. Squinting. Her mouth like a big O as she recognises me. Get in. I push open the passenger door. She looks around then gets in. I head for the showgrounds. For our tree. Kelly still hasn't said anything. Just sits there staring at me. I pull up. As soon as I've cut Patsy's motor, Kelly starts whacking me. I hold my arms up over my face, feeling them bruise. I'm so surprised, there's no pain.

You bastard. You fuckin' bastard! There's rivers coursing down her face and snot dribbling. Her yells echo 'round Patsy as hard as her fists. You PROMISED. You promised you'd COME BACK for me. At least she's stopped hitting me now. I waited. I WAITED and WAITED! She's hitting me again.

I sit there covering my head, waiting for the flood of anger to pass. This isn't quite the fantasy I had for our reunion. But I guess she has a point. So I just listen and take it 'til she's done.

Where were you? You didn't ring. Or write. I thought you loved me... She's kind of folding in on herself. Her voice fading to a whimper. Punching herself instead of me. I grab her wrists, holding them. Not hard. Just enough so she doesn't hurt herself. I see she's been cutting again.

I did try. I rang. But your old-man... we both know I could've tried harder. I'm here now. I came back. Just like I promised. For you, Kelly. And your mum. We can all get outta here together. It's like coaxing a feral kitten. She still has that look like I've betrayed her. But also like she wants to believe me. Hope flutters. Then her face hardens and new tears brim. I watch them, moving in slow motion. They linger on her chin then fall, one-by-one.

It's too late, Shannon. She hangs her head. Pulls her wrists from my hands.

Nah. It's not. I try to sound light but a black-hole opens, sucking.

Yes. It. Is. Kelly thrusts her hand in my face so I can't miss it. A ring. A fucking engagement ring. I'm breaking up, nearing the epicentre. Frozen on some fucking event horizon.

No. NO. NO! I hear words booming round Patsy. Realise they're mine. No. I thump the door open. Need air. Stumble away. Can barely see. I throw myself on the ground in a patch of bloody catheads. Well, at least I can still feel. Looking up I see I'm under our tree. There it is. Kelly 4 Shannon 4eva carved in a big love heart. The arrow pierces mine. I start heaving huge pathetic man sobs no-one ever hears in public.

I pull out my pen-knife and start stabbing it. Bark flying. Flaying it like Kelly's words just done to me. Then I stop. 'Cause if I kill it, it'll be like our love never was. Was never real. And it was. It was the most real thing I ever felt.

Kelly's right. I should've made more effort. Not given up ringing so easy. But why didn't she wait? Just a little longer. But, what if it'd been me waiting? Reckon I might have given up too.

Kelly's arms slip around my waist. Her warmth against my back. I want to hang on to my anger, but I never can with Kelly. I drop the knife and let her turn me. My traitor heart snap-thaws.

I thought you'd forgotten me. Didn't want me anymore. Thought you'd started a new life in the big-smoke. Found someone else. Kelly eyeballs me, wanting to know if it's true. Sees it's not. Drops her gaze. How could I know, Shannon, when I never heard from you? How? she looks at me hard again. You don't know what it's like. Dad's beatin' mum so bad I think he's gonna kill her. When Dennis Hagan asked me out...

Hagan! Dennis Hagan's one of the biggest louts out. Why would you date that fuckin' bovine? I push off Kelly's hands. That prick's the worst for slagging me off, too.

Kelly reaches out, but I back away. Because he is a big tough shit. And I thought it might make dad think twice about beatin' up mum. I was wrong. She looks fragile and shame-faced. I realise those bruises aren't from her old-man at all.

Hagan did this to you? I'm ready to tear off and punch his face into compost. Kelly grabs me.

Shannon. No. Shannon! I turn back. See the fear in her eyes. For me. For what might happen to us both. To us all. There's gotta be a better way. She's holding my heart in her fist.

Kelly. I love you. I've never stopped lovin' you. You were all I ever thought about. Every day. Every night. I did this for me, but for us too. So we can be a normal couple. She looks so beautiful. Tears and snot, bags, bruises and all. She's my only heart's desire. My lips are on fire, I want her so much. But I'm not going to take advantage of her.

I'm sorry I didn't come back sooner. I didn't know it had gotten so bad for you. I'd have come sooner if I could. Bit of a lie.

I've missed you so much, babe. She pulls me to her, strips off my jacket and we lie on it to take the edge off the catheads. Lying there, holding each other, I feel all the hurt and abandonment and barriers leeching away. It's so right she's back in my arms. Nothing separating us. Fuzzy warm. I doze.

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I wake startled. Something crawling through my stubble. I slap at it. It's a hand. Kelly's hand. Not a dream. She's actually here. Looking at me in that cheeky way I remember. Eyes dancing. Fingers straying.

You're back. I got my man back. Kelly's fingers unbutton my flannie. She giggles seeing my chest hair. Curls her fingers through it. Tickling me. Then gasps and rips my shirt open to look at the phoenix. All of it. And more.

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I gotta go. We're all goin' up the bowlo for Chinese. Dennis is comin' round at seven. My teeth grind when she says that. But I can cope now I know it's all alright. And we got a plan: They'll go out for dinner. Kelly will go to the loo when her mum does. They've already been talking of taking off, so it won't be a surprise. Later, Kelly will have a headache and get rid of Hagan. Then, when Kelly's dad is in a grog-induced coma, they'll sneak out the back. Easy-peasy. I'll be parked a street over. Lots of vacant blocks there, so no-one will see me. They wouldn't know me anyway.

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I've been waiting so long, I'm nodding off. But what if something's wrong? What if Kelly changes her mind? Or her mum won't leave him. Thanks brain. I'm wide awake now. Start chewing my nails. Wish I could put the radio on, and distract myself. Another half-hour. Shit. What if they don't come? I'm chewing on the quick now.

Whispers. Loud in the night. I strain into the darkness. Glad the moon's behind cloud. They're here! I jump out of the car and fling open the doors. Kelly and her mum come running, giggling like you do when you're scared shitless and being brave at the same time.

Patsy purrs to life. We hit the highway, up to the Gwydir then head for Mackay. *Back in Baby's Arms* courting us on the radio. In the rear-view, Kelly's mum looks happier and younger than she has in years. She's got this big smile on her face, even with tears runnelling through her pancake. I think she's ok with it all. She squeezes my shoulder and sticks her head out the window catching the breeze. I look at Kelly and she's beaming back at me. I put my arm around the most gorgeous woman in the universe and she snuggles close. Sure, things won't be easy, but I reckon I must be the happiest man alive.

Research statement

Research background

This creative work explores intersectional (Dy, Martin & Marlow 2014) transmogrification (Sullivan 2006). Specifically, examining the complexities of being, entwining trans* (Elliot 2010) and racial identity subject positions (Mokobe 2015). Through support, the protagonist moves beyond internalised shame (Dalziell 1999), finding agency. This hero's journey subverts dominant discourse by transcending haunting regional prejudices bounded by social and gender constructions (Butler 1990).

Research contribution

YA fiction is an accessible genre open to 'hero journey' trope subversion, where normally minor characters or outsider perspectives can be centred through first person point-of-view trans* protagonists. Female-to-male (f2m) perspectives, in particular, are underrepresented in Australia (Jaques 2012). The story addresses these omissions through Shannon, giving voice and agency to perspectives often silenced by mainstream writers, reviewers and even some feminists and queer theorists.

Research significance

This is one of the few trans* theory informed creative writing works in Australia from an f2m perspective. An original work that documents the process of transition through story, and the challenges, joys and hardships associated with such decisions, particularly when compounded by geographical isolation. The 'happy ending' is a confirmation; an overcoming of adversity, troubling the tragic narratives, statistics and media representations usually associated with being trans*. It is the sequel to *Kelly 4 Shannon 4eva* recently published in the YA Special Issue of TEXT, a peak journal in the creative arts.

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