

## **University of Canberra**

### **Caren Florance**

#### **Retinal persistence: Performing the text**

##### **Abstract:**

*Vitreous Syneresis* is a poem by Canberra poet Sarah Rice. As a ‘phatic’ exercise in preparation for a more experimental collaboration, I asked her permission to make a visual work with the poem using her own creative progression from the most nascent thought up to publication-ready stage. She generously gave me her notebook to explore and *carte blanche* with my output. The original intention was to make an artist’s book using ‘print-performance’, but what eventuated was a series of digital prints and an iPad animation moving through the poem’s textual activity. I consider these a work in their own right but also ‘drawings’ towards the original idea of a book. Sarah’s response to the piece was a mixture of delight and vulnerability, but also enlightenment regarding her own material writing process. This paper teases out my process and her reaction.

##### **Biographical note:**

Caren Florance is a research student in the Faculty of Arts & Design at the University of Canberra, Australia. She often works under the imprint Ampersand Duck, and is an artist whose work focuses on the book and the printed word, using traditional letterpress and bookbinding processes along with more contemporary technologies. She also teaches at the Australian National University School of Art and is collected by national and international institutions, mostly libraries.

##### **Keywords:**

Writing process – creative process – visual translation – visual art – textual activity – print-performance

*Vitreous syneresis* is an eye condition in which the clarity of the vitreous humor is altered and produces the symptom of eye floaters: black spots that swim and flash in the periphery of vision. They appear, often causing distress and confusion, and then disappear or linger, depending on various factors. Often the sufferer can learn to ignore them, in the way that we only notice the feeling of our clothes on our body if we let ourselves think about it.

Sarah Rice is a visual artist, craft theorist, and award-winning Canberra poet. Merleau-Ponty's ideas on the body as a primary site of experience help her to process her chronic health problems, which demand constant awareness of her own physicality (Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1962]). Consequently her poetic (and visual) practice is strongly embodied. Her poem, *Vitreous Syneresis*, takes up the experience of embodiment, exploring the traces of relationships as they fade from one's life, and the sense individuals often have that a memory is following them, haunting them, when in fact it is the individual, the self, carrying the trace of experience and emotion through time and place.

### *Vitreous Syneresis*

I see you sometimes  
as retinal persistence  
residual activity  
of the nerve cells

You float before me  
kaleidoscopically

In sensory perception  
you are *positive afterimage*  
from where I sit  
not so positive

Less solar flare  
more dark side  
of the eye's moon  
dead blood black spot

You are my Eye Floater fading

not fast enough for my liking  
green still around the edges

Like the slow dissipation of sound  
from a vibrating string  
once the final chord has been struck

After-glow only occurs in the dark  
present trace of the recently absent  
a haunting in the blackness

I fix my eye on you  
trace your tracking  
left to right  
right to left  
and forget  
I dragged you here  
on the hook  
of my eye's trajectory.

Sarah's poem is constructed from knowledge of both the physical condition and the emotional experience; the version above is the 'final' but as yet commercially unpublished version of the poem, a state of being that a printmaker would call *bon à tirer*: or *ready to print*. It is the artifact, the outcome of much thought and experimentation, offered to the reader polished and seamless, gleaming and clean, all its workings left behind, ready to start a new life, like the white wedding at the end of a fairy tale. However, this 'final' artifact is only one of the possible outcomes from the multiple creative choices that an artist encounters while working.

My work on Sarah's poem is situated in the space between inspiration and resolution, and it refuses to accept resolution as an option, being itself haunted by a number of future possibilities. It is one iteration of what I think of as 'print-performance', a way of working that is less interested in a re-presentation of the 'final' artifact (which is what most printing of poetry is) and more concerned with exploring the creative process that led to its 'resolution', or offering visual and tactile ways to reread the poem's own possibilities. It is a material exploration of *poiesis*, the coming-of-being (Whitehead 2003) of Sarah's creative impulse, a visual 'close reading' of her writing experience.

My creative practice is predominantly textual, straddling design, craft and visual art, and informed by years of working professionally with scholarly editors, poets and fine press printers. I work with the material elements of writing: paper, typeface, ink, visual matrix, screen. I treat poetry as a material in its own right, and am increasingly interested in experimenting with it as textual activity rather than merely as source material. Jerome J. McGann, exploring Barthes's ideas of textual activity (Barthes 1977), writes that

The object of poetry is to display the textual condition. Poetry is a language that calls attention to itself, that takes its own textual activities as its ground subject (McGann 1991: 10).

Like other kinds of artists, poets wrestle with the fluidity and openness of their work before forcing it to concretise (a bibliographic term for a state of textual fixity), and their preoccupations – the space of the page, the construction of form and the graphic conveyance of emotional expression – are also mine. Glyn Maxwell, in his elegant work *On poetry* (2012), talks about the white and the black in a writer's creative process: the *nothing* and the *something* (11), the balance of the white silence and the black creature (19). In *Vitreous Syneresis (I see you sometimes)*, I had the freedom to plunge into Sarah's black and white, subverting them in ways that were encouraged by the poem's own preoccupations.

This body of work was intended to be what I have come to think of metaphorically as a *phatic* exercise: a stepping stone to more intensive collaboration. For Roman Jakobson, phatic exchanges can be 'a profuse exchange of ritualized formulas' (1960: 355), small talk that makes way for a deeper emotional engagement. My doctoral project centres around collaboration with four poets; my 'ritualized formulas' with them involve printing their already published poems in traditional formats such as chapbooks, artists' books and broadsides to build up trust and courage with them. After this, we move deeper together into their – and my – personal processes, until we can compose and produce visual works together, to see how or if we can affect each other's outcomes.

In this particular case, I had already made artist's books with Sarah's poems; this time, as a further step forward, I asked Sarah if she would allow me access to a poem's full process, from its twinkle in her eye to its most formal and resolved state. She gave me 'Vitreous Syneresis' as a Word document along with the notebook that contained its drafts. We agreed not to discuss anything about the various states and the implications of her process until I had produced work from them. I'd intended to make a formal artist's book, letterpress-printed on fine Gampi silk paper that would allow the text to show through the pages and overlap, creating echoes. However, I got caught up in my attempts to visualise the activity of Sarah's words and ended up with a very different body of work: a set of photographic 'drawings', and an animated rendering of the poem's consolidation.

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'Print situates words in space more relentlessly than writing ever did,' writes Walter Ong; 'writing moves words from the sound world to the world of visual space, but print locks words into position in this space. Control of position is everything in print'

(1982: 121). This is something my practice interrogates by working performatively with print in ways that allow words to shift and interact with each other, but Ong's statement helpfully sums up the reason why my initial idea of printing Sarah's creative process as a print object was derailed: I was so taken by the material evidence of her writing process that I wanted to sidestep a concrete print outcome.

It is a rare, and probably innocent, poet who dashes out a perfect poem in one take, ready for publication. Most writers move through various states of their words, often as much in their mind as on a page of any sort. Those who hand-write their drafts reveal much more of their workings than those who start with a screen and a cursor, and Sarah's notebook revealed so much more to me than just her editing skills. Dana Gioia uses Benjamin's writings on the 'aura' to explore the collector's fascination with manuscript copies of literature, but expands beyond the notion of owning a piece of 'untransferable authority' to the acknowledgement that

any reflective person recognizes how much learning happens outside the realm of analytical deduction. Most of what one knows comes from sensory, intuitive, and imaginary faculties. Reason may later examine and organize this learning, but one first assimilated it holistically (Gioia 1997: 12).

What I learned about Sarah's writing process is that she embraces her unconscious as a vital part of her writing practice, and this was revealed to me through her notebook. Her early drafts are messy, scrawled, fluid, exploratory, and in terms of handwriting, very fast yet hesitant and light, with the pen-tip hardly touching the page. Words move down, across, around, become text and paratext, afterthought and marginalia. Some words are completely illegible, others are uncertain of themselves, and could be read in a few different ways (Image 1).

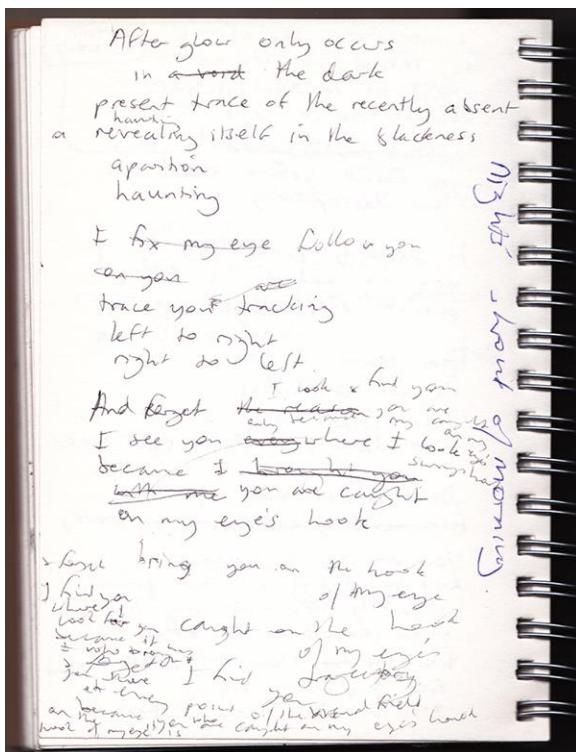


Image 1: a page of Sarah Rice's notebook, early draft of 'Vitreous Syneresis'.<sup>1</sup>

As her ideas firm up, and as she switches from generator to editor, her handwriting correspondingly tightens, slows, resolves itself into a neat legible printed hand (Image 2).

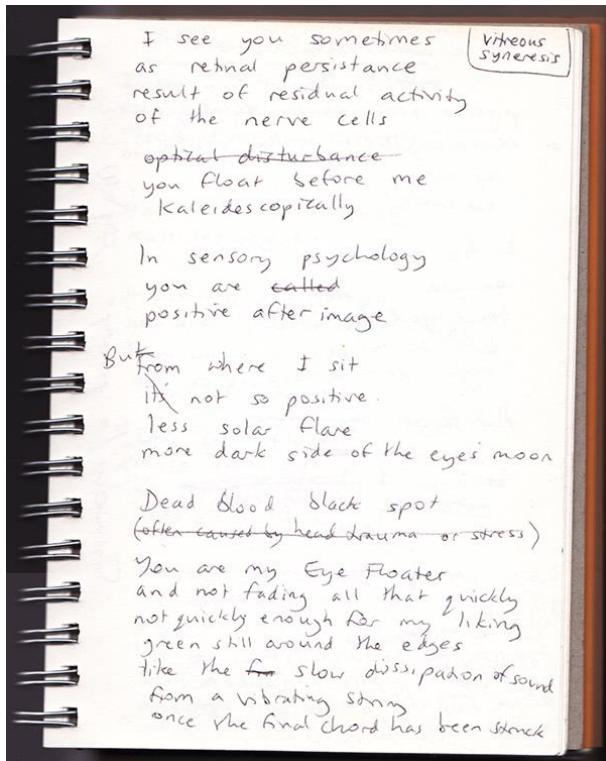


Image 2: a page of Sarah Rice's notebook, middle draft of 'Vitreous Syneresis'.

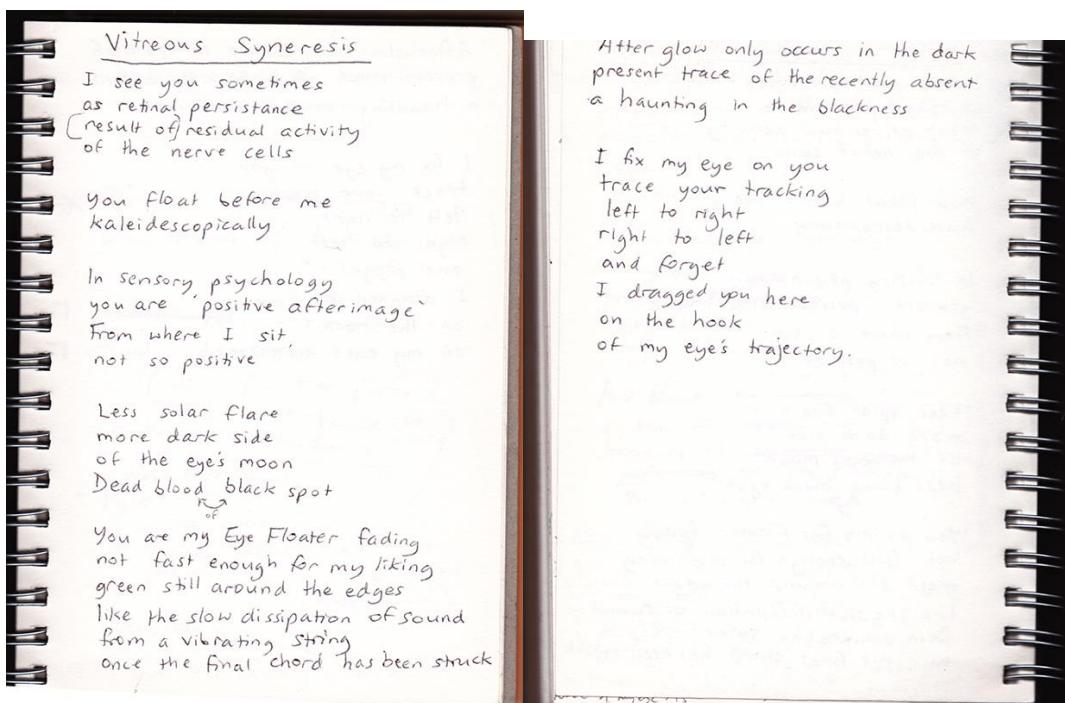


Image 3: two pages of Sarah Rice's notebook containing her fair copy of 'Vitreous Syneresis'.

The last entry for this poem in the notebook is her ‘fair copy’ (Image 3): fair but technically *foul*, in that there are two small ‘disfiguring corrections’ (Gioia 1997: 7). This state was followed by the typescript that you read at the start of this paper, the *bon à tirer* waiting for its edition. The only changes were the ones outlined on the handwritten copy, but interestingly, she ignored one of them: deciding not to follow through with her arrow’s suggestion, staying with the original line. How could we know if there were any other second thoughts while typing it up? If she made changes, and then deleted them, they were not kept. With computer versions, there is no further trace of material process. How many writers remember to save a dedicated copy of their writing after each batch of changes? Do they print them out? Keep their corrected drafts? Sarah told me when she gave me the typed page that there might have been other versions, but she did not make new files when making small changes.

As a designer who has worked with text since the early days of desktop publishing, I know the shift from hand to typescript is a visual leap that encourages textual changes. There is another such leap from typescript to the designed printed page, a leap this particular poem has not yet made. With the designed printed page, writers see their words with a sense of distance that pushes them closer to the realm of the reader, and this often provokes the urge to make further changes.

I experienced this with Sarah in 2010 when I hand-set her poems in letterpress for a collaborative artists’ book between herself and printmaker Patsy Payne called *Those who travel* (Payne & Rice 2009). A number of Sarah’s poems required what is known in letterpress printing as a *fat forme*: a layout that has a few long lines and a lot of short lines, which necessitates a lot of spacing to pad the short lines out to the length of the long lines. Sarah saw a proof of her printed poem, saw it with those distanced eyes. She decided she wanted to shift one word down a line. I invited her to my studio to see the layout, and she realised that to change the position of one small word would take me at least an hour’s manual labour, moving metal blocks – solid, physical spaces – in and out and around. She changed her mind, and informs me that she has never thought about white space in quite the same way again. I would have made the change, because I like change, and shifting possibilities, but I wanted her to think seriously about the impact of such a decision (which is the heart’s desire of every page’s designer).

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I found Sarah’s transition from scrawl to print fascinating: the visual hesitancy, how she was probing outwards from her innermost thoughts with her pen tip. I wanted to recreate that sense of moving almost blindly through a mental space, using the pen as a cane, so I used a combination of black and white space in the animation. I reversed the printed page to become white text on black matrix (Image 4).

Later, when I interviewed Sarah’s response to the work, she shed light on my own thoughts with a revelation:

I often write in the dark at night, so I keep my book under my pillow... If I wake up in the middle of the night and I have an idea, I don’t necessarily turn the light on, so I

find things on backs of envelopes and the writing will be over the top of [itself] and going everywhere, so it's really difficult to read later. ... somehow it keeps the meaning from being too fastened to the page ... (Rice 2015).

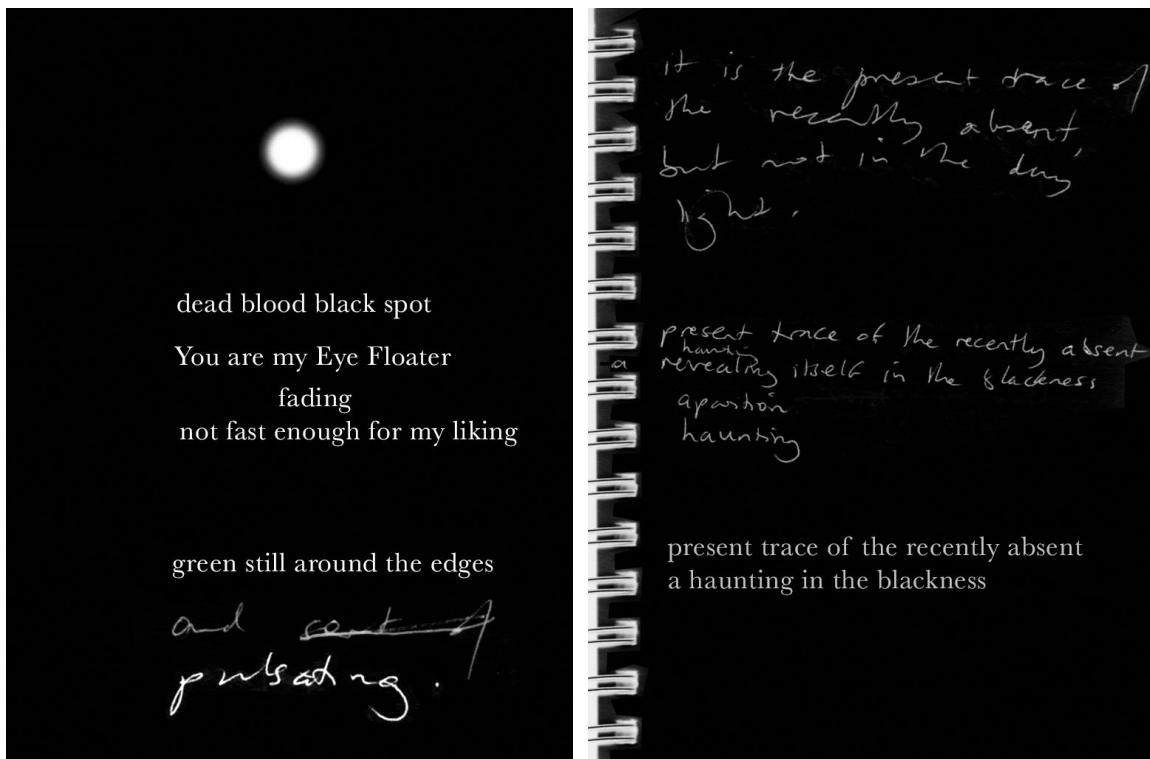


Image 4: two still frames of the Vitreous Syneresis (*I see you sometimes*) animation.

That insight about ‘being too fastened to the page’ is a direct result of her watching my animation. The interview took place almost 12 months after her first viewing, and in that time she processed her first reaction of wonder and vulnerability into an awareness of the importance of her handwriting in the development of her poems:

[When people ask me why I still write longhand, I say] because ... the spacing that I take, how hard I write, how large it is, whether I print or handwrite, how soft it is, whether it goes up around the side: all those things tell me something about what I’m going to keep in the poem, so I tend to write more firmly if I’m sure it’s going to stay, and really soft if I’m not. I’ll do things with it in the handwriting stage that are like a little shorthand for me. ... if I’m feeling confident about what I’ve written, I’ll ... print. It’ll be much firmer, much bigger. As soon as I’m not sure, it goes really pale, small [and] scratchy – so visually, my words are telling me: which are the bits you’re confident about, and which are the bits are you not? ... And that’s really for me the answer as to why I don’t type [my drafts]: because *I can’t achieve ... hesitancy with typing* [my italics]. *It makes everything appear the same weight* (Rice 2015.)

Later again, I read Carroll, who refutes the notion of the page space as passive or empty, and posits it as a ‘second space’ in which writing is movement and erasure is a sculptural act, a sensory experience (Carroll 2014). Carroll articulates something that

I was feeling out through this work: that the animation is performing the weight of Sarah's thoughts and hesitations. Sarah's notebook is a stage on which her handwriting performs her textual process, and I have attempted my own typographical performance of her poem with a visual venue that emphasizes the *removal* of her words as much as the creation of them. Sarah acknowledged this:

[My process is] almost as much about erasing as it is about writing. ... [your animation] really is like watching a compression of time ... to see all [of the edits] in one go, appearing, disappearing, getting crossed out, being erased, is really quite amazing. It remind[s] me not just [that] *words go*, which sounds a bit abstract, but [that] *space comes in* ... their trace, their absence remains in a certain sense. The space [contains] an intensity [that] happens when many many things have gone into something. It has become really potent, but that potency is not just in the words that are still there, but also in the blankness of the [absent] words [so] that you can almost *feel* their absence. And this is a whole poem about feeling: still seeing or feeling the absence of something. Four-fifths of the ['final'] poem is absent, but [with your work] we keep seeing it out of the corner of the eye (Rice 2015, her emphasis).

I asked if her intense editing down is actually a process of de-personalising, making an initial raw emotional impulse into something more general, more guarded? She replied:

I don't know if I think its *less personal* necessarily, I think it's just ... a solidifying or condensing, maybe, of that emotion. ... It's like the peripheral can all disappear, which is interesting in this instance since [this poem is all] about the peripheral: what stays with you on the periphery, what comes into the centre, what's in focus, what's not (Rice 2015, pers. comm. 26 May).



*Image 5: Vitreous Syneresis (I see you sometimes), installation of photos and animation (centre), in situ, 2015.*

I think what I have done with this poem is only one form of performing its possibilities. Most of my work uses print-performance, a process that lies in the Venn overlap of design and art, a space that holds the more adventurous fine printers, the more text-based artists, the bespoke designers, and the visual poets. This animation/photo piece lies outside of my usual processes, which is why I first thought of it as a drawing, a feeling-through, a peripheral motion, but it is starting to feel like a way forward. I found the slowness of working frame by frame for animation similar to letterpress, being equally as painstaking as setting each letter individually in lead type and equally useful as a thinking process. Such slowness allows the same creative space to think about the words that are in motion, moving towards the eye and page. Time-demanding processes such as these build up that sense of potency Sarah talked about, the space filled with potentialities, the trace of the absence of presence, the retinal persistence of words.

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