

Deakin University

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Surface tension (an excerpt)

Abstract:

Surface tension is the creative component of my PhD practice-exegesis thesis. This excerpt, 'Leaving home', comes from the novel-in-progress. The novel is set in Melbourne and negotiates, among other matters, multiculturalism, racism, voice and form. Inspired by near past events, the novel revisits and re-imagines incidents incorporating guilt, grief, and conflict over what it means to be Australian in contemporary times. Fictional content in *Surface tension* arises from real but reframed events of self-experience and from musings on disruptive events that have happened – or might happen – in Melbourne. The novel begins with a car accident in which mates, except the driver, are killed. The survivor, Henry, is the son of a migrant couple from India, he himself raised in Australia. The accident is the catalyst of elements in the novel, including the parents' grief, and issues of racism and multiculturalism played out in interactions within and between immediately impacted families, and the broader community. 'Leaving home' enacts an early narrative peak of the novel at a time of upheaval for protagonist Sarah, as a result of effects of the accident. It relates to Sarah's rewriting of herself.

Biographical note:

Cathryn Perazzo is a PhD candidate at Deakin University. Aside from the novel that is part of her research, Cathryn has other writing interests that include poetry, short story and life writing. She has published short works of fiction and non-fiction, and has been placed in creative writing competitions. Cathryn is a member of Poets of Odd: a group of poets with publishing credits who also have jointly edited and produced an anthology of their works entitled *The cat and the philosopher went for a walk*.

Keywords:

Writing – racism – socio-political – fiction – novel

Excerpt

Leaving home

The removalists arrived at 6:00am and were here until 9:00am, their job complicated by one truck and two destinations. We, I – as prime organiser – considered getting two smaller trucks to make it easier to divide everything into his and hers, as it were. But that would have meant an extra pair of men and extra charges from depot to house and so on. Basically one truck was cheaper. All of my things were to be loaded last, because mine would be the first drop off. This meant careful labelling, ‘S’ or ‘D’ or ‘Other’. ‘Other’ would end up in Dan’s garage. My apartment was so much smaller, with little storage other than one garden shed for the use of all the tenants or owners. There were probably rules about what could be stored, and I guess I would find them out. Strange concept to me, this sharing of common spaces – apart from with my own family.

‘Other’ consisted of Matt’s larger items – like the exercise machine he’d kept in the rumpus room and our family furniture that Dan and I couldn’t decide about. The rest had been collected by the Salvos. It felt strange to apply a label like ‘Other’ to Matt’s things, but I wasn’t going to plaster his name all over his belongings, for the workmen to see. His smaller things, like the rubber crocodile he got one year at the theme park, *Wild at Heart*, I would take with me. I liked to think he kept it as a reminder of his child self. If he had been that sentimental, he never showed it. The poor removalists were forced to play Tetris getting three different groups of belongings into the truck.

For weeks I have been packing and sorting, stacking boxes in the hall, and still I have jams, tomato sauce and other condiments spilling out of kitchen cupboards. Kitchen items are difficult to split two ways, I discovered. Utensils, okay, you might have two sets of serving spoons, but, pots, who gets the Corningware? In the end, I kept aside some basics and much of it, aside from food, went into boxes labelled ‘Other’.

Where was Dan in all this? He’d been civil enough to offer to travel with the truck to both places, see that no walls were knocked, witness if anything got smashed. First he’d go to Fairfield for my rental apartment. I don’t want to make a commitment elsewhere straight away. Who knows, one day I might end up in Queensland, or Canberra, or Perth? It’s not as though I have young children to keep me bound to Dan for access visits or anything like that. For now, Fairfield is close to town and a fresh start, but not so far that I can’t get to Henry’s in a jiffy. Then Dan would go to his mother’s in Kew, where she still lived alone in their family home, to supervise delivery of the rest. She’d offered to have Dan move in for as long as he needed.

‘Thanks, mate.’ This was Dan to one of the men, naturally shifting into a more blokey workman-like tone, the one he reserved for the mechanic. It seemed to me not so much talking down as trying to fit in. He could still make me smile; I’d always found this tendency of his endearing.

So Dan and the truck are gone and here I am with one bucket for water, sponges and mop, and another to hold the Jiff, the Handy Andy, and other cleaning paraphernalia. These will go into the back of the hatchback as I leave. But now for the scrubbing. My wish to leave this house clean and polished is strong.

In another logistical puzzle, we are in the tricky situation where settlement takes place on the same day as the move. I have until 1:00 pm before the buyers can collect their keys. I calculate it will take them until 1:30pm to get here, after they chat with the agent and drive over. That's if they come straight away but I know, I would if it were me. I would be longing to see the place I have been dreaming about and planning for. I hear they are going to make it their family home too. But I will try not to think myself into their heads and dreams for at least the next several hours. Until then, this is still our house, the home where Matt spent so many of his years growing up.

I used to dream about him bringing his wife and children here one day to visit. Certainly at times when he was still alive, I had considered what it would be like to move somewhere else, to search for a place in the city, or in a country town, like Ballarat or Warburton, have another change. To get to know new surrounds, new shops, new streets and parks, and possibly new friends. Always I came back to wanting stability for him, wanting him to know that, no matter what happened in his life once he left home, he would still have a home to come back to. I tried to see it from his perspective, how he might feel as though he were adrift in a row boat on the ocean if we sold the family home from under him. By the time Dan and I downsized in our old age, I used to think Matthew would be well enough established and not need that security. Then again, Dan *is* moving back in with his mother.

I scrub out the kitchen first, even the old oven which they will probably rip out if they renovate, those people I refuse to think about – first spraying and leaving the toxic-smelling 'Easy Off' spray for the recommended five minutes. While it takes effect, I flick the crumbs out of the pantry and wipe rings from jam and honey jars. Why is it the dominant colour left by spice racks is a combination of turmeric and paprika, though I rarely used them? Light shows through the brown-stained louvres of the pantry door. So 70's. Many times we talked about renovating that dated kitchen, about the new layout of doors and benches. Oh well, someone else's project. This room smells the same as the day we first moved in. I can't describe it, but it's somehow practical and warm at once, if a smell can be warm. No, I think it can describe it: the smell of just-cooked bread.

In Matt's room, first I de-web the ceilings. I have prepared myself for this room. Since the accident I've spent much time here, physically and mentally, and I think I'm ready to hold it together enough to clean it for the last time. The furniture is gone, including the desk I have spent hours sitting at, and I've already taken many, many photos of the room as it was.

High on one wall, above a shelf, I see a stain from the squishing of a huntsman thirteen or fourteen-year-old Matt got me to tackle. I remember later, after the whack

with the back of the broom, the dead spider falling to the ground. I cleared it away, but must not have noticed the mark. Now that I see the walls up close again, we didn't do a very good job of painting straight lines. One year we'd painted the walls the inevitable blue, but had not been perfectionists about where the wall meets the white cornices. Dan rode a bit roughshod I've got to say. I'd forgotten about that. It really bothered me at the time. You kind of get used to things, I guess. Just like I rarely ever pulled the bed out from the wall to vacuum behind it. This means doing this thorough, thorough clean, I find odds and sods, like coins and paper clips.

These articles are more innocent and innocuous. I don't expect to see anything as dramatic as what we'd already discovered when Dan pulled out Matt's dresser: cigarette butts and opened, wrinkled condoms, inner contents long since dried. I made sure to pick them up with the plastic bag to avoid direct contact. I tried to block out images of a particular girlfriend. If he'd been around to answer questions, I doubt I would have said anything. Whatever activity he had hidden before, he'd now be beyond the age to answer to us anyway. He would never have imagined his mother dealing with this rubbish one day.

In the far corner, tucked in under a lip of carpet, I see something silver. At first I think it might be a key to a secret box where there might be a diary or letter, but he wasn't the kind to write about his feelings. Or perhaps it's a ring, lost by a previous owner of this house. No, tugging up the carpet's corner, I realise the silver is only noteworthy to Matt and me. When he was a boy, I let him hold my silver '13' on a chain, a birthday gift from my older teenage cousins, welcoming me to teenage hood. Though it was cheap and tarnished, because they hadn't much money to put towards it, I loved it and had kept it safe all those years. I remember making sure he handed it back to me, so it wouldn't get lost. Perhaps a year or two later, I thought of it again and looked for it in my tin box only to find it missing. I couldn't work it out at the time. I asked Dan about it, and even Matt, though I didn't push it far because he seemed less than fascinated by it when I'd shown it to him. Now here it is, behind where his bed stood.

This cuts. I miss my boy. I won't see him again, won't ever get the chance to tell him I think it's not wrong of him to have taken my chain, but actually special. I feel cheated that my boy is not around anymore. I come back again, because I turn it over and over in my mind, to the fact that I can't hate Henry for it. Whatever happened that day was an accident. First, that four wheel drive was barrelling along, and even a more experienced driver might not have been able to react in that time. Even if Henry had pulled out into the path of the other car, the sun was in his eyes. It was an accident. I'm convinced of that.

Ten minutes or more pass before I can move again. I put the chain around my neck and keep on. By the time I finish vacuuming in here, it is 12:45pm and I still have the main bathroom to do. Without intending it, and without enough cleaning tasks to really warrant it, somehow it's come down to the wire. I wish I'd been faster and left

before 1:00pm, not risking the chance of an awkward encounter. I have until perhaps 1:20pm to avoid it.

At 1:10pm, I hear the key in the lock. Damn, no chitchat with the estate agent when they collected the key? I'm still cleaning the bath.

I must emerge and acknowledge them. They'll have seen my car out the front, let alone that I'm still here. It would be more than embarrassing if they had to search around for me. Besides, I'm not ready to stop yet: this is the final corner that belongs to us, that hasn't had us cleaned away, removed, eviscerated. Too dramatic? Probably. At the very least, it is up to me to clean our dirt.

I pop out into the hall, so I'm standing there smiling as the front door swings open. The new mother of the house, Amanda – I remember her from the auction – has her own smile on. So, yes, she's seen my car. I know this is irregular, perhaps illegal, since the contract states vacant possession.

She is friendly enough not to be rude, but less effusive than on the day we signed the contracts.

I jump in first.

'Oh, hi. You'll have to excuse the way I look. I'm just doing the finishing touches. I should be done in ten.'

'Please, don't worry. I'll have my cleaning lady come.' She has relegated me to the level of her hired help. I feel myself blushing.

'Really, I'm happy to. It won't take long. Come in, make yourselves at home.' Welcoming them into their own house? I'm making this worse.

Her husband and two young sons, both blondies, press past and I can hear them opening the back door. Amanda is in gym gear, but made up. She smiles again and follows the others outside. She would have been within her rights to be unhappy about this. I wonder if she's cutting me some slack because she knows about our family situation. I guess that kind of thing gets talked about. I can hear the estate agent playing up the reason we're selling.

I withdraw to the bathroom. I use jiff on the bath, and scour the rust stain left by the odd drip from the tap. I wish there was some kind of guide in this life. Perhaps if I had religion, life would be easier; if only I could believe in the good book of rules. Even that would not be enough. What I really wish is that I'd known the moment just before everything was about to change. I wish I could have seen ahead to when nothing would ever be the same again. If I knew the last moments, I would have paid more attention to them, so I could hold them better in my head.

I buff the mirror, the bath and the shower tiles with a towel, as though I'm performing a benediction. At last I'm done.

I call out goodbye and close the front door behind me. I carry the two buckets on one arm and the vacuum under the other, so I don't need to make two trips and face them again. At the corner of the house, I lift the rubbish bin lid and toss in the cleaning sponges.

I walk up the driveway for the last time.

Research statement

Research background

It seems a reasonable goal, often stated by writers, to avoid didacticism in writing fiction. What if you set out to write a novel with an ethical or moral position at its centre? This is the dilemma that underpins my working research question: What is it to write literary fiction that has as its genesis a sociopolitical provocation?

Research contribution

I've chosen this excerpt 'Leaving home' to demonstrate aspects that apply to my larger project. Underpinned by practice-led research, its contribution emerges from discoveries in making fiction, resulting in choices about form, style, character, and structure. 'Leaving home' integrates decisions I've made to write the sociopolitical with a light touch. I saw early on, for example – based on fiction models – the value of close focus on key characters. The characters in this work I have located in a family milieu, enabling a zeroing in on the intimate, the domestic. I decided the narrative drive would come primarily through actions, thoughts, self-delusions and illuminations of protagonist Sarah. In dealing with grief about her son, Sarah develops a nonsensical, to some, close association with driver Henry and his migrant family. This contributes to a rift in her relationship with her husband. 'Leaving home' is one of many pieces – of prose, of poems, of dreams – I am writing and arranging into a larger patchwork.

Research significance

The significance derives from discoveries made about writing the sociopolitical, balancing the almost didactic with the literary, the imaginative and the creative. The knowledge I am developing will ultimately imbue my PhD thesis. I am examining an approach to writing that is as free as possible in order to stay true to the form of the novel, while embracing having something to say.

Publications have emerged from this research.