

Swinburne University

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Colour me grey

Abstract:

‘Colour me grey’ is a story about a teenage girl managing the care of her dysfunctional mother and her confused grandfather. The story is told in first person from the perspective of Annie’s daughter, Chelsea. Nikolić’s concept of ideasthesia arises from the ‘Ancient Greek words *idea* (for concept) and *aesthesis* (for sensation). Hence ... the term ideasthesia [or] *sensing concepts*’ (Nikolić 2016: 2). When we create narrative we plot concepts in ideasthetic terms—as sensory data. In the context of the conference theme ‘Authorised Theft’—‘Colour me grey’ is a response to a haunting spark. In an interview with Claude Grimal, titled: ‘Stories Don’t Come Out of Thin Air’, Carver describes how remembered detail can be fashioned into story. Carver says:

I use certain autobiographical elements [from my life...] an image, a sentence I heard, something I saw, that I did, and then I try to transform that into something else. Yes, there's a little autobiography and, I hope, a lot of imagination. But there's always a little element that throws off a spark ... Stories don't come out of thin air. There's a spark. And that's the kind of story that most interests me.

That’s the kind of story that most interests me too. ‘Colour me grey’ is a story about light in dark—shades of grey—it captures difficult love in ideasthetic terms, using concrete and sensory narrative detail. ‘Colour me grey’ was shortlisted for the Josephine Ulrick Prize 2016 and first published by Review of Australian Fiction (RAF) 2016.

Biographical Note:

Julia Prendergast has a PhD in Writing and Literature. Julia’s short stories have been longlisted, shortlisted and published: Lightship Anthology 2 (UK), Glimmer Train (US), TEXT (AU) Séan Ó Faoláin Competition, (IE), Review of Australian Fiction, Australian Book Review Elizabeth Jolley Prize, Josephine Ulrick Prize (AU). Julia’s theoretical work has been published: TEXT (AU), New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing (UK), Current Narratives (AU), Testimony Witness Authority: The Politics and Poetics of Experience (UK). Julia teaches writing and literature at Swinburne University in Melbourne (AU).

Key words:

Narrative – ideasthesia – metaphor – association

Sometimes Mum's already sinking when I get home from school. She takes more pills, washes them down with a few slugs of gin on ice, just a dash of tonic, and finally she's out, flat out, on the couch. After a few hours pass, I know she's down for good.

Getting her into bed is the hardest part because I can't carry her on my own. She doesn't weigh much but it's awkward and so I put a blanket on the floor next to the couch and I move her onto that. I reach under her shoulders and move her top-half down first. Sometimes her head bangs on the floorboards because I can't hold her head properly. Sometimes she opens one eye, just for a second, but she can't see me for the grey.

I pull the rest of her onto the blanket. Her legs thud against the floorboards like old potatoes, but she doesn't flinch. I drag her across the floor, pulling her along on the blanket. The floor in the bedroom is carpeted so the last stretch is the hardest.

If Grandad is being difficult, Mum has to stay there on the floor because I can't lift her on my own. I put some pillows and a doona down there to soften things up, but still she's left on the floor like nobody cares.

If Grandad is in a decent mood, he helps me get her into bed. I lay some old towels down first, in case she wets the bed, and then we try to lift her. We usually get her in after a few attempts. I tuck her legs under the covers and wipe her sweaty face on my sleeve. If her skin feels like cold lasagne, I get a warm cloth to revive her face.

Usually, she stays in the shadowy place for a couple of days, waking briefly to top herself up. She has a pen beside her bed and she marks lines on the paper, keeping tabs of her intake. The scribble looks like a hangman score-sheet.

Grandad can sense when Mum is in trouble. He gets busy in his room, usually he tries to fix something: a broken chair leg, the handle of a pot, anything. I hear him humming. He always hums when he's engrossed in something: classical-sounding tunes, no lyrics. I ask him, again and again, if he wants some music on, but he says: *No, no, I like the quiet*, and then he starts up again.

He can't process what's going on but he reacts to Mum's greyness in his way. I suppose you never get used to seeing someone you love all fucked-up like that, even when your mind is half gone.

After we've put Mum to bed and Grandad is pottering away in his room, I make a start on the dinner. I'm standing over the boiling pasta when I hear Grandad say my name.

I turn to him and he has shit all over his hands. At first I think he's been into the Bolognese sauce but that's only because I'm exhausted and I can't see straight. He looks at his shitty hands as if he's not sure what it is. Then he holds his palms out to me like he's begging.

I yell at him not to touch anything. I take him to the bathroom and wash his hands and fingernails, four times with the scrubbing brush. I tell him to lean on me and I help him step out of his pants. His droopy, shit-smearred balls jangle around because he can't get his balance.

Those undies are going straight in the bin, I say, talking to myself, reassuring myself that I won't need to scrub that thick adult shit off his pants.

They're my favourite ones, he says. *Please don't throw them in the bin. They're not itchy and they don't dig in.* He is crying. His upper chest is heaving out like a pregnant woman's belly, but it dips hollow between his ribcage so that he looks like a mangy bird, a sick, pathetic bird.

I tell him: *I'll get you some new undies. Really comfy ones. I'll get you a whole new packet, all different colours. You can come with me and pick out the ones you want.*

They're my favourite, he says, becoming hysterical.

Well you shouldn't have shat in them. I am yelling but it's suffocated by the steamy claustrophobia of the shit.

I didn't know it was coming, he says desperately. *I was busy. I didn't realise it was coming.*

Busy, I scoff, and then I think that I might vomit because I love him so much... I remember that I must never forget.

No crying, I say. *Please Grand, no crying today.* I get him into the shower and adjust the taps until he says it's just right. Then I go out to get a rubbish bag, knowing all the while that I'll go to bed feeling guilty if I throw out his favourite undies, knowing all the while that I'll be up to my elbows in old man's shit any minute.

I give him intimate instructions about how to wash himself. I show him again how to lather the soap in his hands. I bend over and mime it for him, rubbing all around. *Then do it again*, I say, *lift up your balls, get right into all the creases and cracks.*

Each day I have to remind him about basic stuff and he's not even that old. I didn't know you could get dementia before you were really old.

When Grandad is on the third round of lathering and rubbing, I close the shower screen and coach him from the outside. I take the filthy undies to the toilet and turn them inside out, hoping the shit will drop out in one lump, but the stubborn foulness holds fast. I go back to the bathroom and work at the basin. I use my hands and then the nailbrush, working furiously. When I've finally finished, rinsed and disinfected, I open the shower door.

Time to get out, I say. Grandad is sitting at the base of the shower, shaving his legs. He has cut himself along the shin and the base of the shower is covered in bloody water.

Don't move, I say, taking the razor: *Sit there and DO NOT MOVE.* I go to the kitchen and grab some band-aids and a tea towel. When I come back, he is sitting right where I left him and I take a good look at the cut. *FUCK!* I say.

I beg your pardon, he says and that makes me laugh because he doesn't make the connection between my swearing and his bleeding leg. He has no idea. He's not even looking at me. He is intent on the blood but he's detached from it too— might as well be talking to the telly.

I start crying quietly then because the poor old bastard wouldn't hurt a fly. He looks up at me and his torso disappears. His head looks as though it's propped on his knees, long arms either side like a white monkey, an albino monkey with silver-black hair.

Never mind, he says. *Everything will be fine. Just you wait and see.* He turns back to his leg. He runs his fingers up his shin, inspecting the watery blood.

I take a roll of toilet paper from the bathroom drawer. Grandad holds the toilet paper against his shin and I dry his body. He bends forward and applies pressure to his leg.

It is pathetic. He is pathetic. I am pathetic. I should be handling it better. I'm not even done here and already the motherfucking guilt.

I dry him gently in long firm strokes, along his back, across his shoulders. His veins are thick and strong and so exposed. His skin is wet and thin, like damp tissue paper. He looks older, with his wet skin and his wet hair, slick and silvery black against his bony skull, he looks old enough to have dementia.

He bends forward, holding his leg, trying to be helpful and obedient; his wrinkly old balls sag between his legs. He is helpless and endearing and revolting, like a baby but old and ugly, and now I understand how the mothers can love the ugly babies, even when they're crying and covered in vomit and shit. It's because of the need. Need is very seductive.

I don't miss one drop. I dry him gently and firmly, behind his ears, inside his ears, under his armpits, behind his knees. I do it on auto because I know his body like my own.

I put band-aids over the cut and wrap the tea towel tightly around his shin to keep up the pressure. Then I roll some deodorant under his armpits and he laughs. He says it tickles. *Do it again*, he begs.

I give him a squirt of my body spray. *Ooh that's lovely*, he says. I kiss him on the forehead and hold his pyjamas out so he can step in. Then I blow the dryer over his hair and brush it away from his face.

I throw his clothes in the washing machine: hot water, double powder, pre-wash and soak. I stand still, my hands against the warm lid of the machine, listening to the swish of the water, mesmerised. It's like the waves are lapping the shore, right at my feet, as if I don't have a care in the world, as if I have nothing better to do than stand in the sun and watch the water.

Grandad comes to the laundry and stands beside me, his hand on the machine beside mine. *You are a very lucky girl*, he says. *Do you know how lucky you are?*

I don't answer him. I put my hand on his. I'm waiting for the hidden camera crew to reveal themselves, then we can all have a laugh, we can all say: *Of course that's not her real life. It's a joke*. We stand beside the washing machine a few more moments, still and content, as if we're watching the waves roll in and life's a holiday.

Grandad kisses me on the cheek softly and then wanders off to his room. I go to the kitchen to see if I can salvage the pasta. I dish it all up and put a bowl of shredded cheese beside Grandad's plate. He likes to add that by himself and I'm not up for another meltdown.

I knock on his door and step into his room. He is already asleep. My school shoes are placed neatly beside his bed. He has polished them until they look like new, and they were nearly ready for the bin.

When Mum is stuck in the grey, Grandad often goes for the shoes, scrubbing the soles and wiping the surfaces with a hot cloth. He places a few drops of eucalyptus oil inside them, polishing them up until they're so shiny, you'd think we were in the army. It's a bit of a wasted effort on his part, because I don't worry too much about school these days.

I say: *I am a very lucky girl*. I'm crying hard and kissing him. I say: *I know how lucky I am*. He doesn't flinch, just sighs contentedly in his sleep. I know he can hear me. People can hear

you in their sleep. I talk to Mum all the time. I tell her all the things I can't say when she's awake, staring at me with her eyes full of grey.

I go back to the kitchen and pour myself a gin and tonic, a double. I decide to have Grandad's undies fresh and ready for him when he wakes in the morning.

Everything will be fine, I say. Just you wait and see.

Research statement

Research background

Nikolić's concept of ideasthesia arises from the 'Ancient Greek words *idea* (for concept) and *aesthesia* (for sensation). Hence ... the term ideasthesia [or] *sensing concepts*' (Nikolić 2016: 2). When we create narrative we plot concepts in ideasthetic terms—as sensory data.

In an interview with Claude Grimal, titled: 'Stories Don't Come Out of Thin Air', Carver describes how remembered detail can be fashioned into story. Carver says:

I use certain autobiographical elements [from my life...] an image, a sentence I heard, something I saw, that I did, and then I try to transform that into something else. Yes, there's a little autobiography and, I hope, a lot of imagination. But there's always a little element that throws off a spark ... Stories don't come out of thin air. There's a spark. And that's the kind of story that most interests me.

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Research contribution

'Colour me grey' is a story about a teenage girl managing the care of her dysfunctional mother and her confused grandfather. The story is told in first person from the perspective of Annie's daughter, Chelsea. 'Colour me grey' examines the duties of primary care through a young-adult lens. As a creative artefact, the story provides a means for understanding how writers sense concepts in metaphorical, associative and sensory ways. 'Colour me grey' enacts the concept of ideasthesia through the interplay between form and content—the concept of ideasthesia has not been applied to creative writing practice.

Research significance

'Colour me grey' was a finalist in the Glimmer Train International Short Story Award for New Writers (US) 2013 and the Glimmer Train International Family Matters Short Story Award (US) 2014. The story was a finalist in the Southern Cross Short Story Competition 2015, judged by Tony Birch. 'Colour me grey' was shortlisted for the Josephine Ulrick Prize 2016 and published by Review of Australian Fiction (RAF) 2016.

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