

## Nanyang Technological University

Jen Crawford

### ***Soft Shroud*: excerpts from a long poem**

**Abstract:**

*Soft Shroud* is a 32 page poem in which ‘a debtor undoes a suicide’. The poem creates a journey in which the debtor moves ‘from graveyard excavation / to floating ova’.

Opening passages are located at an imaginary version of Grafton Bridge, Auckland. *Soft Shroud* uses this public landscape as both a scaffold and a jumping off point for somatic exploration, personal but not private or even individual. The poem begins with an excavation of covered losses, and over the whole becomes a migration in bodily time from enshrouded wound to eruptive making. Explorations move from the vacuum space of the suicide to images of volcanic lability and plenitude.

Revision of the manuscript has involved cutting, extension and rearrangement, as well as the development of titles, a contents page, bridging notes and footnotes to explore the poem’s textual sources.

This paper consists of sections from the beginning of the poem with accompanying notes, followed by a brief discussion of the poem’s development process.

**Biographical note:**

Jen Crawford is Assistant Professor and Coordinator of the Creative Writing Programme at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. She is a poet from Aotearoa/New Zealand who completed her doctorate at the University of Wollongong, Australia. Her poetry publications include *Admissions* (Five Islands Press, 2000), *Bad Appendix* (Titus Books, 2008), *Napoleon Swings* (Soapbox Press, 2009) and *Pop Riveter* (Pania Press, 2011).

**Keywords:**

Poetics – Revision – Bankruptcy – Paratext – Temporality

**from *soft shroud***

*a debtor undoes a suicide, travelling  
from graveyard excavation  
to floating ova*

in ink, on a dried rice-skin: *the cloth that covers the dead... wrapped around and  
around your wound*

0. unwrapping

*once a thief stole from a thief –  
stole the thief's ring, so the thief  
stole the thief's finger to get the ring back.  
the ring rattled on the bone, the bone rattled  
in the hand. the hand rattled in the hands  
which rattled in the arms of the handless thief.  
a thief came to scoop up the bones of the thieves  
who were stealing the night  
with their clattering and cries –  
to scoop up the bones and put them in order,  
sort arms from arms and ribs from ribs  
but the rib bones  
hooked at his own rib bones*

*it's still raining. floodlights go on  
under the bridge so that the excavation  
can continue through the night.  
we dig so deeply now that the skulls  
are black and heavy as stones,  
and sometimes the stones  
crack open like skulls.  
the rows of tibias are arranged.  
the femurs are labeled and arranged.  
the piles of hands and feet  
bleed their mud; these will take some time.  
traffic proceeds on the bridge above us  
and the bridge shakes in the air*

1. *i.m.*

isolates frozen  
we don't remember this together

your inner ears  
burnt black

your funny mouth  
glued shut

we don't remember this together  
inner ears  
burnt black

drunken beast  
in yellow plastic  
roaring operatic

roaring door  
open to the night's  
drive and

this is what you did  
you do this paintcan

falling  
from the roof

splattered  
drive destroyed

attendants wheel  
the motorbike over

the bridge  
is operatic

coins on dirty carpet  
stripped wires by the socket  
forms unsigned

a loan  
to pay the debt

attendants come  
a name comes  
to give your things away  
hands and imprints  
overlain

name hovering drunkly  
over a piece of paper

appears to be your name,  
you bankrupt  
it is not

if I carry you here  
you'll germinate in green stars  
through shroud unwound  
wound unwinding as pelagic sky.

a skeleton arm  
hangs from a star

the fingerbones  
droop to my earlobe  
touching a sex arrayed  
as small blue fish  
twitching gorgeous at the waist  
which doesn't know you or your death

on a balcony of iron springs  
wormeaten wood  
spills into woods  
carpet for sleepless roots

under felt-concrete  
rest's the waking  
skin as an eye  
blue as a bridge of small blue

fish tremble the fluid between

3. *hash-house hole*

how did you come into this debt?

breath

how did you come into this debt?

breath

how did you

icing tears open the lace working

the upright blood that swarms into animal forms on a white verandah

where the sun grows you amongst yielding wood, carved flowers' shade

for a soft projection – uncantileverable

the belly of her sun, bright camera growing

a turn to face sun blooming gorse

herringbone child

passing lead subtraction up her mother's arms

the feeling is of dropping while the arms themselves lift

the sign of the feeling of lifting arms when they drop is sewing through

the positioning of threads given the through of a thread

whether the thread's there, or

an I pouring sand for a funnel of itself

is sewing the proposed revision of

how it would have that it had been

how it would have that it had been

satining a pure formerlism

buttonhole of gone kitchen's last

enamel baby's in the soup

present a light cap for distress

the wing of a birdhole

an inner distinction made in limbs

foreshadowing theft

the systematic use of *force*

Notes

Part

- 0 ;“under a stone roof the stone master closes in  
in an iron corridor the iron master closes in”

Yang Lian, “Grafton Bridge”. *Unreal City: A Chinese Poet in Auckland*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2006. p39

“Upon its completion in 1910, Auckland's Grafton Bridge was said to be the largest span reinforced concrete arch bridge in the world.” The bridge spans a gully, on the western slope of which is Auckland's first colonial cemetery, the Symonds Street Cemetery. The construction of the bridge was troubled: “The site was difficult, being a steep-sided bush clad valley, and there was trouble with the complexity of the formwork and getting it in place. ...[A] clause in the contract stipulated that “...no progress payments should be made on the arch span till it is completed and tested.” This no doubt caused the downfall of the [Ferro-Concrete] company. Late in the contract the company was declared bankrupt and therefore could not continue. ”

“Grafton Bridge”. *Engineering Heritage New Zealand*. IPENZ Engineers New Zealand. n.d. Web. 6 June, 2013.  
<<http://www.ipenz.org.nz/heritage/itemdetail.cfm?itemid=135>>

‘The delicate pure invisible light I have not  
Seen since I left Grafton. In those days  
I’d climb the hill on the Domain  
Before dawn, when the leaves were cold as iron  
Underfoot...’

James K. Baxter, “Autumn Testament”. *Selected Poems*, ed. J.E. Weir. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1982. p166

- 1 "The sovereign individual is the kind of self-regulating animal that is required for the essential functions of culture (for example, well-functioning creditor-debtor relations)."

Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, Tr. Carol Diethe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. pxxiii

“...now the prospect for a once-and-for-all payment *is to be* foreclosed, out of pessimism, now our glance *is to* bounce and recoil disconsolately off an iron impossibility, now those concepts ‘debt’ and ‘duty’ *are to be* reversed – but against *whom*? It is indisputable: firstly against the ‘debtor,’ in whom bad conscience now so firmly establishes itself, eating into him, broadening out and growing, like a polyp, so wide and deep that in the end, with the impossibility of paying back the debt, is conceived the impossibility of discharging the penance, the idea that it cannot be paid off...”

Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, Tr. Carol Diethe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. p63

- 3      “oh the beefsteak it was rare  
and the butter had red hair  
baby had its feet all in the soup;  
the eggs you could not catch,  
for if you touched one it would hatch  
in that all-go-hungry hash-house  
where I go...”  
        Charlie Poole & the North Carolina Ramblers,  
        “Hungry Hash House”. Columbia, 1926. 78 RPM.

## Research Statement

In *Soft Shroud* I was looking for poetics through which I could encounter the social engine of debt and bankruptcy, and suicide as a bodily symptom of the psychic overwhelm that those conditions generate. The experience of financial crisis is considered as a somatic, as well as a social story. I wanted to explore it through poetic approaches that would allow for intersubjectivity and counterlinear temporality – aspects of experience which may be real in the body, in the imaginary, and in language, though without commonly being verified in public narrative. In *Soft Shroud* these approaches allow a poet-self to move simultaneously backward and forward through time, ‘undoing’ the suicide narrative as a shared experience, finding some of its seeds and reconceiving. Working with unstable subjectivity and temporality also prompted me to look for certain kinds of ‘scaffolding’ to bridge narrative and phenomenological aspects of the poem experience. I’ve sought to provide these through paratextual elements such as titles, bridging notes and endnotes – but over time that scaffolding has actually helped to show me some of the poem’s hidden or undermanifested structures, such as its movement through the elements of earth, vacuum, water and fire. I am continuing to develop these further.

Excerpts of the poem have been published in *Shearsman* (UK) and *Brief* (NZ).