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”

“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.”


‘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...’

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)."

“...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....”
“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).