

Deakin University

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Like clay

Abstract:

When I write fiction I am clawing at ghosts – inhabiting other realms in a quest for meaning. ‘Like Clay’ represents a journey of this kind. The impetus for this story was a fleeting moment in ‘real’ time: a brief conversation. The act of ‘fictioning’ constitutes my inability to leave that moment alone. In this way, the story arises from a haunting desire for knowledge, understanding.

But why fiction – why ghostly ‘others’ as a means to knowledge?

Fiction writing is a process of making meaning via the work of association – a process of listening to the resonances between. When I work associatively, I link tactile knowing with invention, fashioning a new engagement – an intimate connection between the real and the imagined.

In her Nobel acceptance speech, Toni Morrison untangles the myth of an old woman – blind, renowned for her wisdom. A group of children approach the woman and one of the children asks: ‘Is the bird I am holding living or dead?’ (Morrison 1993). Reflecting on her writing practice, Morrison suggests that ‘speculation on what (other than its own frail body) that bird-in-the-hand might signify has always been attractive to me’ (Morrison 1993).

This analysis goes to the heart of the associative labour of narrative. It speaks to the seductive lure of the signification process – slipping away from ‘real’ time to a ghostly ether – where the frail bird-in-the-hand takes flight, where ‘unmolested language surges toward knowledge’ (Morrison 1993).

‘Like Clay’ was a finalist in the *Glimmer Train* Short Story Award for New Writers (US) 2015, and the runner up in the Geoff Dean Short Story Prize (AU) 2015. The story is available in *Island* literary Magazine.

Biographical note:

Julia Prendergast has a PhD in Writing and Literature. Julia loves short form fiction. Her short stories have been longlisted, shortlisted and published locally and internationally including: *Lightship Anthology 2* (UK), *Glimmer Train* (US), Séan Ó Faoláin Competition, Munster Literature Centre (Cork City, Ireland), Australian Book Review Elizabeth Jolley Prize, Canary Press, TEXT, Island. Julia’s theoretical

work is also published: *Current Narratives*, AAWP, *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* (UK), *Testimony Witness Authority: The Politics and Poetics of Experience* (UK: Cambridge Scholars Press).

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It's called an olfactory hallucination. It means you smell things that are not there to smell. It's not that weird. We all conjure things that aren't there. What do you think memory is?

Apparently the very nerve that connects the olfactory membranes, to the olfactory bulb, ends in the same region of the brain that is responsible for memory – so they're sort of the same, connected, except that memory is everyday so we don't freak out about it. Aaron learns all about it on Google. You can google anything.

Aaron explains it to his mum because he's not sure anyone bothered about that. *Hallucinations are like memories – your mind has twisted it together so you think it's real.*

Panting, swallowing, squinting, licking her lips like a pale skinned blue tongue – fingernails gouging biceps, striking the air violently – *Get it away.*

He turns – shielding baby Isla from their mother's lashing.

Clare lurches forward, torso over knees, vomiting on Aaron's outstretched hand, bright orange vomit on his sneaker.

The nurse comes. *It takes time to get the meds right, the balance. Let's clean you up, honey.*

Clare smells blood and bone, senses death, rotting flesh death, her own or baby Isla's. She isn't quite sure.

She slaps at Aaron like poisonous air, staring with grey glass eyes, frozen in elsewhere time. It's worse than when she grabbed his neck, held on –

By the time she's admitted, the scabs on his neck are dark and rigid, like old memories. He drags the scabs under his fingernails as they restrain her.

Clare's eyes skip over Aaron as if he's someone else's child. That's what she kept saying during the labour. *It's someone else's... someone else's* (moaning through clenched teeth) *baby.*

He was there when baby Isla was born. He says: *It's yours Mum; of course it's yours.* He can't see past the moment: pelting pain and no fucken ambulance. He doesn't realise, then, what she means... but he understands pushing, he understands urgency. Hallucinations are immune to pushing and urgency.

He calls the ambulance again and again. He barely has time to help his mum get her undies off – one leg is still hooked as she pushes, on all fours like a horse, big powerful buttocks, milky white. By that time he doesn't dare get close, thinking she'll kick him from behind. She's writhing and dangerous, groaning, as if she were heaving furniture, sweaty and determined, heaving hopelessly until Isla comes out, wet and wrinkly, skeptical and disbelieving, an old person's expression on her baby face.

It's so fast in the end – baby Isla on her chest – any rules about what a mother might say or do in the presence of her son – bygone.

Clare tells Aaron about Jed. Surfer Jed. *We made love in his kombivan over the autumn months.* Clare looks dreamily at baby Isla as she speaks.

He's hot and elsewhere, thinking of the urgency and the arching, slipping between memories, hopscotching between silky wet conditioner and someone else's breath.

Clare continues: *It was cold but the days were sunny and the bench seat was warm from the sun. And his skin –*

It's revolting, thinking about his mum making love to anyone, even his Dad. Especially revolting because his mind is distended with the heaving work of the vagina – full heavy – a kaleidoscope of vaginas, folding over each other like rose-petal labia.

Aaron used to think there were clear lines, sharp boundaries, but there are no lines. In the real world, things layer up like petals, like softwet skin, until you have no idea what's real.

Apparently Clare and Jed had been in the water for a couple of hours, surfing, talking to each other with their boards and their bodies, in the language of the wash. As they trudged in, Clare scooped the tumbleweed off the water, like wet sparkling hay, like a large shimmering star.

So beautiful, she said.

It's a weed, said Jed. *Beautiful beautiful beach weeds.*

Yes, said Clare. *Golden.*

Their cars were parked in close proximity in the deserted carpark, no movement except for the dancing lambstails and a few flying tumbleweed, skittering over the asphalt.

Jed headed over to Clare's car, offering her a cup of tea from his weathered tartan thermos. It was hot black tea, sweetened with brown sugar. They watched each other change under their towels, off-handedly, feigning disinterest. When Jed came over again, to top up Clare's tea, a towel wrapped around his waist, she'd seen enough to know that there was nothing under the towel but him.

...Get the kitchen scissors, says Clare, interrupting her own story and taking possession of her more familiar voice: crisp orders and motherly direction. *The ones I use for the chicken. And the blue string in the third drawer. We need to cut the cord...*

And then she is off again in her dreamy singsong, her fingertips tracing Isla's eyebrows, lips. *It was really nice sex,* she says. *Generous, appreciative sex,* she adds offhandedly.

Aaron doesn't realise there are different types of sex. Holding the cord in his hand, he wonders about the categories. The cord is rubbery tough – he has to saw between the tied points a little – *generous sex – selfish sex – desperate sex – virgin sex –* wrangling with the cord, eyes on the pointy end of the scissors, on Isla's softly whipped folds – *guilty sex – old people's sex – crying sex – sorry sex.* The cord is tough and veiny,

wet blue and purple white on the underside, like a twisted sinewy sea snake – spent and warm wet.

Clare says: *Somehow sex had become aligned in my mind with mundane bodily functions, like eating – the necessity without the lure. Sex was just another thing someone wanted from me.*

Aaron wants Clare to stop but he has no words.

I'd been too many years with the same man. There was no reciprocity. I was nauseated by Cliff's desire because it had become part of the domestic... economy. Food and sex represented the neverending circus of want. Take and take. TAKE. I didn't eat much for a time and I didn't care for sex. ... If I was desperate, I masturbated, she laughs. Only If I was desperate: just for me, only for me. Jed was a godsend, said Clare. He didn't ask anything of me. The wash of the waves, watching out for each other, and generous, generous sex.

Aaron is free of the cord now. He stares at the placenta, at the length of cord attached, splayed across it like a tail, so that the meaty mound resembles a stingray, livery grey.

Fresh, generous sex with a stranger, says Clare assuredly. It gave me a boost. And that would have been enough, to keep on keeping on, but then I found out about Isla.

Clare's voice switches again: *Grab some newspaper, she says. Today's paper is on the table...* She lets out a long sigh as if she's in a very deep sleep. *The world would be a simpler place without sex, says Clare, but we crave it of course.*

Aaron returns with the newspaper and Clare looks up at him as if he is new to her, as if he's just arrived. *Do you remember when I walked in on you with the laptop ... and the conditioner?* Clare laughs long and guttural – it's like the moaning but breezy. *Even when I shut the laptop the woman's voice kept on: yeh Baby, yeh Baby. You remember Az?*

Clare is laughing hard. It's perhaps their last shared moment in real time. Aaron misses the laugh that ties their real together, even though it's awkward, the talk of jacking-off as he wraps the meaty afterbirth, hands shaking. He wraps it neatly, crisp corners, like a present.

The ambos arrive then. Better late than never as they say.

There was a woman on the screen with her legs spread wide, calling him: *yeh Baby, yeh Baby.* He had conditioner all over his hand and he was going for it, flogging off, school pants and undies beside him on the floor.

Clare arrived home early because Brad had an appointment at the orthodontist. As they barged in, Aaron grabbed the conditioner – but then he dropped the plastic bottle in favour of his school pants. He was trying to cover himself but he was a right angle, and there are not so many things that will conceal a right angle. Brad was laughing wildly, a loud fake laugh, reminding Aaron that he had the goods: he was one up.

Clare said: *Be quiet. There's nothing funny.*

Brad switched from laughing to the woman's voice, but he did it high pitched and squealy: *yeh Baby, yeh Baby.*

At the dinner table ... of all places, said Clare, giggling softly.

At first they don't realise about the olfactory. Who would ever suspect it? It doesn't even sound like a real illness.

When Clare arrives home from the hospital with baby Isla, Aaron stays at home to help. Cliff is too busy at work to take the time, and Aaron is happy to stay home because it's summer time, uni break, and he would otherwise be tagging along, helping Cliff with the landscaping business. The landscaping is hard, hot work, and Aaron doesn't want to be alone with his dad. He can't bring himself to tell his dad about the affair, but the not-telling weighs heavy in his hands, like a placenta, so he prefers to be home, helping with Isla.

Helping is an understatement as it turns out. Aaron realises something has shifted in Clare. At first she says she can't feed Isla because her nipples are cracked and she has a terrible headache. Her temples feel as though they will explode. But then she won't even hold her. *Go and buy some baby formula,* says Clare. *Ask the people at the chemist to help you.*

Aaron bundles Isla into the pusher and heads for the chemist. He follows the instructions for the bottles but he isn't sure about the nappies and the bathing. How often? Or just how ... He asks Clare to show him.

Google it, she says. *Don't turn the light on,* she adds. *Lightning and razor blades. FUCK. And leave the fan on. The whirring noise. Like waves... You can google anything Az.*

Aaron finds a 'how to' video: 'How to change a baby girl's nappy'; 'How to bathe a newborn'. The trick about putting the warm washer over the baby's chest, to help them settle in the bath, that's a good one, and he follows that midwife's advice after that – *mid on call.* She really knows her shit. Full of handy tips without being too bossy.

Aaron places the warm washer over Isla's tiny belly and she turns all sleepy and weightless. One small square of washer and she is mostly covered, tiny feet bobbing. Sometimes she falls asleep in the water and Aaron doesn't want to get her out, she looks so peaceful, but his shoulder aches, and his knees are numb and restless against the floor tiles. At least Isla usually sleeps a good while after the bath. It tires her right out.

When Cliff arrives home, he keeps up with the sort of talk that he goes on with at work. Garden talk, like he's the host of Burke's Backyard and he's talking to people who actually care.

That bloody bamboo, he says, so stubborn. Bloody rhizomes ... so cunning. It's always about the root system. Always. And bamboo is underground and sideways. It's a bastard of a thing.

Cliff talks to Aaron as if he's going to take over the family business but Aaron's not interested. Not even a little bit. Cliff doesn't ask about what's gone on during the day and Aaron doesn't tell. He goes to the bedroom to give Clare a kiss but that's it. Since she came home from hospital, Cliff's been sleeping on the couch. He takes a can of beer from the fridge, cracks the seal, sighs appreciatively, and keeps on.

There's nothing as stubborn as bamboo. Underhanded. I think I'm on top it and then there's more and more, like a fucking web, spreading in all directions while my back's turned...

Aaron glances sideways at his dad, wondering if he knows about the affair. *I don't know anything about bamboo, says Aaron.* He hates it when his dad does that, adds something to the garden talk, something that takes him outside the world of plants and into the realm of the everyday. It gives him the absolute shits.

Go and have a shower, says Aaron. Isla's had her bath and you'll stink her up.

Aaron wonders if Cliff is using the plant talk like code-speak: fishing around the edges, edging in for details, seeing what he knows. That's what a guilty conscience does. It makes you think that everyone knows what they have no pathway to know, exposing the underground for all to see. Aaron looks his dad in the eye. Cliff's gaze is clear and strong, untroubled and loving, and Aaron realises that he's operating at the level of the foliage, above ground, above innuendo.

After a shower, Cliff sits at the table with the boys, eating fish and chips. He says: *You know about the rhizomes. I've told you but it's important that you understand the root system. It's so messy that it doesn't look like any kind of system, hairy underground cobwebs, shooting their roots everyway, under the soil. They're impossible to get rid of. Just when you think you're clear, there they are again, as if you're imagining things...*

Aaron is glad to have Isla on his shoulder. He pats her back, jiggling her up and down to hide the shaking. He wonders again whether his dad knows. Just say it, he thinks. If you know just tell me.

Even with all that clay the rhizomes go full throttle. They don't worry about clay because they're just beneath the surface and the clay is deeper. He sighs, cracks another can... *People misunderstand clay.*

Aaron takes a big bite of the deep fried flake. The oil and crumbs from the crunchy batter sprinkle his lips like wet sand. He bites and chews, bites and chews. He has nothing to say. How do you respond to that? *People misunderstand clay.*

Eventually they have to take Clare back to the hospital. Cliff insists. He says: *It's urgent. She's not making any sense. Bloody bones and tumbleweed eyes. Crazy. Messy ... Dying.*

In those first days they discourage visitors. Aaron doesn't understand how family turns to visitors. He doesn't like the way the doctor's eyebrow twitches when he says *discourage*.

Aaron knows Isla will be crying for him. He tosses in bed at night because he's used to having her there, in the cot beside his bed. Each morning, his pillow is flecked with fresh blood and scabs.

After a few days, they're allowed to visit. When they arrive at the hospital, Aaron bends down to kiss Clare and she smells the same, so that's something: woody flowers, earthy not sweet. She looks weird though. She's wearing her own clothes but someone has buttoned-up her pink shirt and she never does the cuff-buttons up. She wears them turned back so that you can see her skinny, tanned wrists, and she wears it open at the front, with a tank top underneath. They've got her buttoned up like a freak. Her hair looks strange too. It's not blow-waved the way she likes it and the hair around her face is fuzzy. She is pale and pasty, and her teeth are yellowy-grey and ugly, like the Mums who forgot about themselves years ago.

Aaron is fixing Clare's shirt back to normal when the doctor arrives, along with two nurses. The older nurse wheels Isla in. She is in a hospital bassinet: clear like glass as if she's the patient, or a specimen. She's awake, reaching her tiny arms around, kicking her legs.

The doctor speaks first. He says: *It's called an olfactory hallucination. OL-FACTORY*. He sounds it out like they're retarded. The doctor and the older nurse look at each other, nod. *In everyday terms, it means that Clare smells things that are not there to smell. It's part of the psychosis. The post-partum psychosis.*

Post-partum psychosis, says Cliff assuredly, as if he uses the words all the time, as if he's always known about this hallucinatory smelling disease... as if psychosis is hayfever or a headache.

Isla stirs in the bassinet. She's making agitated noises: short, sharp whimpering, throwing her arms around and punching the air. Aaron walks to her, takes her in his arms. He can't believe she's here, being looked after by strangers. It's not right.

Olfactory hallucination, says Cliff, just as confidently, as if saying it aloud makes it normal, as if it's okay because it's got a name, as if he's talking about fucking bamboo. *Post-partum psych...* he starts.

STOP repeating the words, says Aaron sharply and Isla gargles at him in her baby language.

The doctor and the older nurse look over the chart and talk quietly together. Aaron listens to the names of the drugs that they give her. Mostly they end in zepam – anything zepam must be the thing for the high-strung hallucinatory types.

Aaron says. *Will it go away?*

Of course... says Cliff.

It's impossible to say, says the older nurse. She gestures to the doctor for confirmation, support.

These things take time, he says. It's different for everyone.

You need to fix her, says Cliff. His voice is pitchy on fix and Brad laughs nervously but doesn't break from biting his nails, shifting his right sneaker back and forward, repetitively. The rubber under-sole makes a sticky Velcro sound against the hospital carpet.

She's the mother, Cliff adds, and then he makes a noise that sounds like the start of a laugh – Cliff is not a giggler and it's unnerving for everyone. The mother of the boys too, I mean... he adds.

Clare's lips are dry. She's legally stoned. Her eyes are frozen like grey-green marbles, old marbles, cloudy. Aaron is glad to have Isla because it's an excuse for pacing and not looking anyone in the eye: walking up and down, up and down, eyes on the baby. Brad keeps on with the grating crackle, rubber against carpet, and the clipped crunching, teeth against fingernails.

Cliff collects himself. Speaks. His voice sounds as if it's breaking. *There was no olfactory business with the boys. I mean she had a coupla bad days, a few tears here and there, normal baby blues or whatever; that's what she called it herself. Nothing like this. Usually we'd just get out of the house. Go for a walk. Have fish and chips in the park.*

Aaron is pacing faster, jiggling Isla up and down. *When did she have a bottle?* He asks, directing his question at the older nurse.

She's just about due, honey. Would you like to feed her?

If she's making this squeaky noise, she's hungry, says Aaron. She feeds on demand. There's no schedule.

I was just going to change her nappy... the older nurse begins.

I change her half way through the bottle, says Aaron. Like how the breastfed babies sometimes have one breast and then a nappy change. That's the best way for Isla or she'll cry when you're changing her.

The younger nurse has the curl of a smile on her lips.

Okay honey, says the older nurse.

I'm meeting the boys at 11, says Brad. I gotta go or I'll miss the train.

Just give me a minute, says Cliff.

You promised. You said if I came you...

Don't be so selfish, snaps Aaron and Brad stops with the sneaker grating.

Isla starts crying more insistently. Aaron says: *Where are her bottles?*

The older nurse looks to the younger. *Can you take him to the bottle room? She turns to Aaron. Would you like to put her back in the bassinet while you're walking? It's safer...*

No, says Aaron firmly but without insolence. *She's hungry. She'll cry if I put her down.*

Later, at home, Cliff sips a can of beer: small repetitive sips as if he's drinking a hot cup of tea. He drains the can in this way, takes another from the fridge. When Aaron walks in the front door, Cliff turns to Brad. *Turn the TV off for a sec.*

Cliff sits on the coffee table, holding the A4 printouts in his hand for support. He raises them in the air as he speaks. *You need to read these, he says. Your Mum's mind is confused from having Isla. The post-partum psychosis... it means she can smell things that aren't there, and the smells take over. She's convinced she's going to die, or Isla's going to die.* He places the paper on the coffee table. *It'll take time but she'll get there.*

You're not a doctor, says Aaron.

Brad looks Aaron in the eye, shifting the balls of his feet up and down, up and down, so his white knees are moving out of his black shorts like piano keys. Brad looks at the pile of paper on the table. Farts. Laughs briefly.

It's not funny, says Aaron.

It's a lot to take in, says Cliff. *It takes time. Everyone is different.*

That stinks, says Aaron. *Why would you do that?*

I can't smell anything, says Brad. *Maybe you're catching the olfactory...*

That's our mum you FUCKTARD. Aaron launches a hard punch at Brad's bicep.

Enough. That's enough, says Cliff. *It's a lot to take in. Tomorrow we're going in to see her, together. I'll be home at five.*

I'm going in first thing, says Aaron. *Isla should be at home with me. They have weird hospital bottles. She doesn't like them. The teats are the wrong shape.*

She'll get used to them mate, says Cliff.

What would you know? says Aaron sharply.

Brad stands abruptly and switches the telly back on.

Aaron takes the printouts in his hand; he stands in front of the telly and shakes the printouts in the air. *She can smell blood and bone and she's reckons someone's gonna die. I'll make sure it's not Isla.* Aaron eyeballs Brad. *You better man up, cunt.*

Maybe it's real, says Brad, sitting upright. *Maybe it's not psychosis,* he adds. *I'm serious. Dad,* he looks over in Cliff's direction. *You smell like that blood and bone sometimes when you come home from work, like fishy horseshit. Maybe she's not crazy.* Brad looks to Aaron and then to his dad for support.

It's not real mate, says Cliff steadily. *She's not crazy,* he adds gently.

I didn't mean...

I know. It's a lot to take in. She smells it all the time. She can't see outside the smell if you know what I mean.

Cliff sets the laptop on the kitchen table. He continues his research about getting rid of bamboo: ridding the world of rhizomes.

Cliff talks loudly to the boys as he works away on the computer. *Plastic rhizome barriers are used extensively, he says, but apparently root pruning should be the first option. The problem is, every point is necessarily connected to another point, there's no beginning or end, and the bamboo on that block has been there for decades. It's well established, shifting sideways, like thinking...*

Shut-up. FUCKING SHUT-UP, yells Aaron.

Settle down please mate, says Cliff.

It doesn't make sense. So do us a favour and shut the fuck up.

Look ... enough with the language mate. It's a lot for everyone to take in.

Cliff concentrates on the screen – if you want to use a plastic barrier to control the spread of the bamboo, you have to be meticulous about installing it, and you have to check around the perimeter of the barrier once or twice a year. Then you can remove any rhizomes that are trying to escape over the top of the barrier, and you can catch the sneaky motherfuckers that track just underground, along the edges. You can use bark or even mulch within the barrier, encouraging the rhizomes to spread just below the surface, making them easy to locate and prune. *Yeh, trap the fuckers,* he says aloud.

Shut-up, says Aaron, but it's subdued this time.

Problem is, you're chasing hairy cobwebs every which way. There's no way to get to a beginning.

– As Aaron walks out of the nutters unit and towards the hospital foyer, he smells Isla's baby vomit on his shoulder. He thinks of her sleepy smile, twitching at the corners of her mouth as he places her in the hospital bassinet. Clare is already out of it, on whatever *zepam* they give her at night, so he doesn't go in and kiss her.

If Isla can't be with his mum, alone – if that's not safe – then why can't he take her home? It's fucked. It doesn't make any fucken sense. Everyone thinks that babies should be with their mothers no matter what, but it's bullshit. She won't even hold Isla. She can't even hear her, even when she's right there, crying, day after day, week after week, she doesn't even flinch. You'd think she would snap out of it for Isla's sake. Aaron knows she can't, but you'd think she would.

As he walks into the foyer, he sees the pretty girl: the young nurse. Most nights they leave around the same time. She's a practising nurse apparently, in training, but she's better than the older nurses. The young nurse offers handy hints but she doesn't boss Aaron around. She phrases the advice so she's not telling him what to do: it's more like a story. She says things like: *Oh there was a gorgeous baby boy, Archie, he used*

to fuss when we held him on his back, so we put him in the handball position, sort of like a footy but your fore-arm's involved. Like this...

She's like the *mid on call*, the google midwife, but beautiful too.

They walk into the foyer from opposite directions. *Hi*, she says.

Hey, says Aaron, and hitches his jeans, even though he likes them lying low. He walks on into the blue-black night, so still. As he's preparing to cross the road at the main exit, the pretty nurse pulls up beside him and winds down her window. *Do you want a lift?* For a split second he wonders if she's breaking some kind of doctor-patient code, but she's not a doctor, and he isn't the one smelling dead people.

He wants to walk. The cold wind against his face makes him feel like things are okay. Or could be. Might be. The cool night wind reminds him of when he was just a normal kid, waltzing down to the castle park to get pissed with his mates. Hoping he might end up in the concrete tunnel with one of the girls.

Where do you live? she says, because he's hesitating.

That way, about 10 minutes... In a car.

Jump in. I have to stop and get a couple of things from Safeway, she says. *But it's on the way.*

Safeway, he repeats, like one of the nutters.

She giggles, turning to look at him briefly before driving on.

As she pulls into the supermarket carpark he looks at his phone, reading a text message from Brad. *Hey Fuck Face. Get some bread on the way home.* As he's reading it another text comes through. *And some coke. Thanks cunt.*

It looks closed, says the pretty nurse. *I thought it was open until midnight.*

I need bread. And coke, he says. He turns sideways to check her reaction because it sounds awful, like a bogan-family's shopping list.

They sit there for a minute, contemplating the closed supermarket: the thick cobwebbed grey, hidden lights beneath darkness.

You're good with the baby, she says.

She's my sister, he says, like an idiot, like idiot thoughts run in his family.

Yes but you're amazing with her. And your mum.

She talks like someone older. She's older than him by a couple of years. He guesses she's early-twenties but she talks like she's thirty. So assured.

She won't hold her, he says.

I know.

It's so mean.

I know it seems but...

Yeh, yeh, olfactory and she doesn't trust herself on the drugs. I get it, and she's not mean, she's not a mean person but it is mean, even though she doesn't mean it. It's fucked. I feel like she must be pretending, but I know she's not pretending. I just come in to cuddle Isla so she doesn't remember that her Mum didn't want to hold her.

The pretty nurse puts her hand on his leg because he's crying. He wipes his tears on his sleeve and reminds himself that her hand is only there because he's crying. It's specifically tied to the crying. She's not a laptop.

Isla's really lucky, she says. I shouldn't be saying this... there's a baby that went to surgery today to get a tube put in to her stomach – just so we can feed her. She can't suck; she won't suck. If we try to feed her, she cries. She goes red and squealy and distressed. I shouldn't be telling you this... The mum was out of it and she used to put the bottle all around the baby's face, connecting here and there like pin the tail on the donkey, and the baby is disturbed now, it's tiny memory is so... fractured that it can't suck. It's sucking reflex is all mangled. Isla is lucky, don't you see? She has you.

She's not mean, he says again, shifting abruptly to wipe away tears and snot. She moves her hand away and he wishes he'd left the snot. He stares at his leg and then gawks with longing at the thick shadows of the empty, turned-off Safeway. He puts his own hand on his leg but it's not the same of course.

She puts her hand back on his leg. *That other baby is going to have a shitty life; I hate to say it but there's nothing for her... She's doomed from the start.* This time they kiss; he's not sure who starts it. It's soft and she's not mean and she's not a laptop.

It's crowded and bent and awkward, and the young nurse giggles as they wriggle over the gear stick into the back. It sounds like his mum when she wasn't a nutter, like his mum laughing when she couldn't turn the laptop sound off. It wasn't funny then because he was so stiff, too stiff to turn back.

The young nurse takes off her shirt. It smells like the hospital soap. Then there's the smell of Isla's baby vomit and Aaron's overworked deodorant. For a moment he wonders if this is dead wrong. He thinks of Isla and hopes she's not unsettled. He hopes the night nurse has time to wrap her up tight, put her close against her chest. He takes his shirt off too. His skin is buzzing and he can't get a rhythm with the kissing. He thinks he should be doing a better job, but it's too urgent. He's swept in the urgency.

He remembers his dad's voice. *We have to take her in... This is now urgent.* He had baby formula like fine sand between his fingers and he said: *I can manage; I've got this.* His voice was high like he was overcome with the stiffness and he didn't sound convincing. His dad said: *It's not about Isla mate.*

Aaron said: *Of course it's about fucking Isla. I mean fucking about Isla.* His dad looked like he might laugh but he wasn't a spontaneous laughter like Mum, the promise of it just flitted across his eyes, like the shiver of a breeze across the water, a glassy sparkle. He said: *We're taking her in mate. She's not making any sense. She's saying some really whack stuff... tumbleweed and bones. Blood.*

In the back seat of the car with the beautiful nurse, in the urgency, Aaron is making noises like the laptop: *yeh Baby, yeh Baby*, but without the words. He stops for a second, thinking it might be weird, but she's doing it too, although hers is more like: *Baby yeh, Baby yeh*, higher pitched but softer than him, like whimpering, because she's a girl. Her perfume is summery, like flowers and aeroguard, like a herb potion with summer flowers, not like insect repellent. Her neck is salty, soft. He keeps thinking: she's not mean, make it nice for her, but it's so urgent (we're taking her in mate).

It's over so fast he doesn't know if she came. It's so fast one of her legs still has her stocking and undies attached (like his mum, pushing Isla out). He touches the stockinged leg and says *Sorry*, then *Thank you* and they laugh.

He thinks she came because, in the urgency, she was stiff and hot, arching. Pushing her hips into him. The arching wasn't resistant (like getting his mum in the car). It was non-resistant arching, greedy and sweaty. She didn't even flinch at the scabs on his neck, raked to bleeding again, again – pleasure-pain fingers. He ate her breath in the urgent arching because he couldn't kiss properly, and they gulped greedily at each other's breath. He thinks she came in the breath eating urgency because now her breathing is exhausted, calm and deep. Like his mum after Isla was born. Before the strangeness set in.

He thinks she came, but maybe she's just disappointed because he didn't satisfy her. Maybe the smell of death is looming. He can't smell it but that doesn't mean it's not real. Maybe he misunderstood the arching, the urgency, like people misunderstand clay. Maybe he was too caught up in the moment to give her generous sex. He felt like it was all about her but maybe it was only ever about him. Memory is slippery and easily misunderstood, you see, like conditioner. Like clay.

Research statement

Research background

Jared Diamond asked the acclaimed evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr (1904-2005) why Aristotle didn't come up with the theory of evolution. Mayr's answer was 'frage stellen' which Diamond translates as 'a way of asking questions [sic.]' (ABC1 2013). The idea that a particular way-of-asking might generate a particular way-of-knowing and, indeed, a particular branch-of-knowledge, is intriguing, especially when we frame the practice of creative writing in those terms: as a way of asking questions.

Research contribution

Drusilla Modjeska unpacks the concept of 'temporising' in her article 'Writing Poppy' (Modjeska 2002: 75). This discussion invites us to consider the generative possibilities of the temporising space – as an imaginative space for writers – a way of asking questions.

'Like clay' enacts the concept of temporising at the level of form and content. It interrogates the connection between language and imagery, the work of association and similarity, and the way we use these tools to unpack our world.

This analysis recognises the temporising space as a metaphorical playground – in the spirit of Aristotle’s concept of metaphor as an appreciation of the ‘similarity [*to homoion theorein*] in dissimilars’ (Ricoeur 1977, p.23). At the heart of the work is an analysis of alogical processes of association: supporting Freud’s analysis of ‘reciprocal relations’ between dissimilars (1900: 404), and Froeschels’ observation that ‘the subconscious [mind] considers similarity identical with identity’ (Mavromatis 1987: 178).

Research significance

This work takes Modjeska’s analysis, and theories of subconscious processes of association, and enacts that inquiry in the performative narrative space.

‘Like clay’ was a finalist in the *Glimmer Train* Short Story Award for New Writers (US) 2015 and a runner up in the Geoff Dean Short Story Prize (AU) 2015. The story is available in *Island* literary Magazine.

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