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Remembering Sue: Last Writes

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Abstract

We are members of CANI-Net. Sue Porter was pivotal in our efforts to create and sustain the necessary, loosely fashioned spaces to inquire artfully and collaboratively into our fragile existence on this shared and damaged planet. Then suddenly she died. We were grief-stricken. There was a pause. We reconvened, to honour Sue through the ways of working we had accumulated between us over the past decade. We offer you this glimpse into our collaborative mourning for Sue and her ways of sustaining us (including her delight in the company of rolling hills; crows; cormorants; frilly knickers and red dogs). We talked together. We wrote together. We ate together. We drank together. We made art together. We laughed a lot. We cried. We were altered by the possibilities of collective mourning - finding new ways to carry on *being* together. We remembered Sue¹.

¹ Creative Artful Narrative Inquiry Network

On collaborative writing and editing

There were nine of us involved in producing this text. We came together over a long weekend retreat in Wiltshire. We wrote and we played - drawing, cutting out and printing; activities that Sue had loved. And we remembered Sue, keenly and meaningfully, touching on other losses in our lives.

A few months later about half the group were able to meet in Edinburgh, to edit our collection of writing into this paper. We were the 'hard core' editors, spreading the hard copy out in front of us, and armed with scissors and glue sticks. We went in with decisive actions, joining the pieces together with collating material here; slicing sentences away there; and generally guiding readers into the text, differentiating between the original writing 'between the nine' and the editing process 'between the four', with different fonts.

After this process the document was returned online to the whole group, and was, quite unusually, accepted 'as is' as the final document. Even the person who had initiated and co-ordinated the 'remembering Sue' project, who had expressed a deep reluctance to 'relinquish' the editing process, had acknowledged that these mo(ve)ments (Davies & Gannon, 2005) and diffractions (Barad, 2007) of place, space and assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004) had given rise to unexpected and greater clarity in our text. Subsequently, another configuration from the original nine came together to perform parts of our text as a reader's theatre performance for a conference and, later still, yet another configuration came together to write the introduction to this paper. This has prompted multi-faceted discussions (still ongoing as we write) to take place amongst us, about how the process of editing the text that you are now reading has been a many-layered, multiply-peopled, geographically and ethically challenging and entangled process.

Sue Porter, 1954-2017, succeeded by her husband Glenn Hall, her brother Philip and her little old mum up in Minchinhampton; two red dogs, Morgan and Eric; multitudes of friends, colleagues and students; a murder of crows, a flight of cormorants and a gaggle of artful collaborative inquirers. She left behind a number of electric wheelchairs, many scarves, piles of modernist jewellery and paintings, a many-windowed house overlooking the Usk, and a vast open space in which to write, make art, take off our clothes, make love by still waters, and dance.

Friday 24th November 2017: 6:20pm

In the sterile room; it's the lights more than anything, the ticking clock, the uniform chairs, the green baize notice board marked only with drawing pins.

We crack the silence with nervous jokes and Jane stands to make a diagram of the history of this thing that has brought us here. Of Jane and Sue and the development of collaborative writing; it spills excitedly on to two, three, four, five pages. Tess and Davina hold the sheets and then we talk.

I need to care about something. Where does emptiness come from? How can it be so noisy?

I do care about being here remembering Sue; holding the presence of her absence. I have cried in this room before. I'm part of this history that Jane told, interleaved and interwoven with these people present and these people absent, some dead.

I remember the first time I met her. I was looking for a doorway, an opening to the next place, the next journey, or was it the continuance of the present journey²? It was dark outside and the lighting was dim in the room. There were biscuits. There was Sue's presence. She was talking but I felt more she was listening. Didn't she have a thing she did with her eyebrows? That made the presence of the unspoken thoughts clear. As if she were listening with her eyes.

Dear Sue,

This time we started with a talk about 'white running man'³

which would have amused you

as a white woman on wheels

I did not bring a wheel chair because the electric one is broken, and I hate being pushed around. I hate being pushed around. But now I am here I have remembered how much walking there is. They have replaced the pee-able carpeting with wooden flooring in most places, although there is still carpet for cripples to pee on in our work room⁴.

Why am I telling you all this? Because now I am here I think I might cry unless I maintain a chatty tone.

I missed you doing the 'you and me' presentation

I miss you at the university

I miss you at the café.

² Sue organised the Open Space sessions of ANINET

³ We were given a health and safety introduction from a member of the Ammerdown staff where the fire exit sign was referred to as 'the white running man'

⁴ Flotex carpet, popular some years ago as a hard-wearing, washable firm but 'warm' surface for domestic kitchens, also suitable for wheelchairs, children's nurseries and art rooms.

You're here,

You're here in the talk of lemon curdy pudding⁵, here in the image of your chair that could rise to great heights. You're here in the sound of your voice; its dry, deliberate wit. You're here in the circle in this room, like you were 5 or 6 years ago, writing and making red with us all (Gale et al., 2013)⁶. You're here in other ways, other ways I have forgotten; here in the missed opportunities, the moments we didn't linger, the time we didn't get. You're here in a regret, you're here in how you brought us together, you're here, you're present, even in your ...

No, I'm not going to say it. I refuse. It's just too obvious, even if it is true, and I refuse.

You're here and that's it. You're just here.

And I am aware, in this room with its Flotex carpet, that although you would be pleased I stood firm alongside the word cripple, you would have noticed, maybe you even have noticed, that we have started once again, with the writing, not the making

I see no reason why art and making cannot exist without words, for instance

Image 1. Monoprint with collage (Tessa Wyatt)

Image 2. Monoprint (Tessa Wyatt)

Image 3. Monoprint (Tessa Wyatt)

Image 4. Tessa's cutouts in the bin photo (Davina Kirkpatrick)

Image 5. Monoprint (Alys Mendus)

⁵ Lemon Curdy Pudding: 2 large eggs separated, 55g self-raising flour, 285ml milk, 55g butter, 115g sugar, lemon, grated rind and juice.

⁶ A collaborative writing retreat happened in 2012 at Ammerdown.

Image 6. Photopolymer print (Davina Kirkpatrick)

Image 7. Collage (Davina Kirkpatrick)

Image 8. Monoprint and collage (Melissa Dunlop)

Image 9. Monoprints produced by the group photo (Davina Kirkpatrick)

There is no one recipe for memorialising a life. No manual for reconstructing the shattered narratives of lives that have intersected with the one whose body no longer responds in the old expected ways. When the breathing stops. When the heart.

Out of the blue. From a cloudless sky, shattering the predictable news of the day. Of course, there are the cultural rituals: the funeral, a religious service perhaps. But how does a collaborative writing group, a loose collection of academics, educators, artists; how do we, as such a band of sisters and brothers, gather our grief; re-member? This chapter is a record, in word and image, of our gathering for Sue (and most certainly also for us), when we came together to create our own unique eulogy, to discover how our paths might move on beyond this fracture in our lives. Yes, this work is in a sense a signpost, a signpost at a major junction of loosely trodden tracks, of the muddy doggy fox-runs that were, are and will be our lives.

At the end of November 2017 we had come back to Ammerdown, that familiar retreat in the southern English countryside where most had been many times before, with the intention of celebrating a life and exploring the nature of personal and shared grief; of how that might be expressed through collaborative art-making and writing. This chapter follows a loose chronology (inevitably

fragmentary) of a long weekend of discovery, the traces of experience of a very particular collective biography, grieving Sue.

(writing written retrospectively is in bold)

Saturday 25th November 2017: 4.45 pm

What did Sue like? The art materials were spread around the room.

Crows, votive legs and trees, red dogs and knickers.

I fell into my recent safe way of working with silhouettes and paper cuts. Then tried the mono printing - not splashing large amounts of teal paint around the room, but carefully adding a thin layer of black onto a piece of perspex.

The magic happened as I learnt how to use the process. Circles of crows⁷ (small, medium and large) appeared; crows on magazine paper, text, printing with thick black paint, thin black paint, layers printing crows, ghosting shadows, burnishing edges, scribbling nonsense.

I remember how you challenged me. I always started, you said, with words, with the talking, then the writing, never the making, and how you quoted the a/r/tographers (Springgay et al., 2007) that I gave you to read right back at me.

“Loss, shift, and rupture are foundational concepts or metonyms for a/r/tography. They create openings, they displace meaning, and they allow for slippages. Loss, shift, and

⁷ Crows that make us think of the poet Ted Hughes' crows and Max Porter's poetic novel, *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*.

rupture create presence through absence, they become tactile, felt, and seen.” (Irwin and Springgay, 2005)

And you have been here in the process of making; making has absorbed you. It is the making that makes this a different kind of remembering: remembering from all the talking and writing and gatherings of people that have gone into the other memorials.

It was mentioned that Sue liked looking at cormorants drying their 'wing pits' and how she would sit for hours at a window in Laurghne, West Wales, watching them. Cormorants are not as easy to draw as crows.

The white paint stuck to the masks, the colours were wrong, the shapes looked like double headed Nazi eagles. The birds were fighting me, refusing to play nice.

Be intuitive, don't worry about mistakes; go with it! I tried a knicker mandala – which had to become a thong, and a lot of cormorants went in the bin. Jane's poem crept on to some crows.

Dropped dead, silence,

No more chats,

An empty space where you used to be

Empty, loss.

A lot of cormorants are in the bin.

I can't find the art work that I did for you this morning. If I could find it. If I could find you.

I have used A3 paper. Or card. Card I think. You needed A3 space, I felt.

She liked looking out the window along the estuary – the picture of the red dogs, alert sentinels commanding the road. She liked watching cormorants lifting their wings, Patti Smith and Patti Smith Concerts, votive legs and silver brooches and modernist paintings and mid-century furniture.

She wanted to bring the outside in. She liked crows, crows in the branches of the trees, black against the sky. She had a dead crow roadkill frozen in her deep freeze and she asked me if I knew a taxidermist. I did, as it happened, and I sent her the email, but it didn't work out. I'm not sure why, only that the crow was still in the deep freeze when she died and at some point the deep freeze was moved and left unplugged for four days before it was remembered, too late for the crow.

but we still don't have you, we still can't get you back, no matter how much beauty we make ... no matter how many crows, cormorants and red dogs we make ... we can't make you....

The thing is, I didn't really ever know Sue – sure, we shared spaces, wrote into one another's words and images, blasphemed together, posed together, passed through the same doors. So now, when I seek out what or how to express 'Being with Sue', I feel stuck on what is the nature of knowing!

The group breathes in and out, here in the room, our words bouncing and echoing from one image, one story to another, a giving to, an offering, a lighting up, an illumination, a shedding light, a listening, a remembering.

So the tree chose her today and she felt comfortable to go with the flow and see where that would take her. She had cut out some more images of trees, and the word 'breathe' because what it said underneath went straight to her heart. And then she instantly regretted the resonance, realising that this is not about her. And when later her feet had taken her outside to the leaves and she was no longer thinking about a collage, she still looked for 'Breathe', still wondering how she could weave that in, thinking she wanted to will the leaves to breathe themselves back into life, or her friends to will their missing friend back in their midst, keeping her alive in the stories they tell and the art that they make

I am Gesso, all thick and white

Like a smutty putty, I am slathered all over somebody's old images

Leave me to set

You do not care as you slop me on, leaving remnants smeared on blue plastic cloth

I wait

The heat of the room, the busy-ness of the bodies intensely doing, mixing, rolling, splatting, washing up

Someone returns to me.

Wetting the paper and rubbing inexpertly at the paper, again and again, rubbing and shredding the milky white back of the paper into worms, with my fingers again and again, my impatience scrubbing through the layers of paper, gouging holes, scarring tears. Sue had more delicacy and much more patience, much more care. Or rather I imagine she did.

I keep starting and erasing the words.

What if I don't write?

I'm thinking about Sue writing⁸ about stopping before the allotted time, allowing herself to stop, to not be the good girl, to not fill the space.

I liked when the room was set up, before the making began full of potential and possibility and then the shared play.

I can't seem to do this pull myself from image to word. I think I'm going to fail this time round.

Sue would have written beautifully and lyrically, noticing the shifts in energy between us, the nuanced details, noticing the unnoticed.

How to use this process? What process? What constitutes collaboration, collaborative writing? I want to write into the personal emotion, to open my own explorations of self and other to that melding mixing metamorphosis – that metabolism on the contact boundary as Fritz⁹ would have it.

Just as we thought to take a walk

on the wilder side of the fence

over the stile and far away

down came the hail in little jewels

and shut out the sun

⁸ Sue writes about this experience in her notebook for her PhD proposal notebook.

⁹ Fritz Perls, the charismatic figure associated with the development of Gestalt Psychotherapy (see Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1953)

Just as well we explored the labyrinth

in the dewy, shaded endings as

down came the hail in little jewels

and shut out the sun

the ending

Now, the red leaves fall

and in the gasping last gusts

the feather black bin bag ripped, recycled, barbed

and caught on the wired boundary fence

shaking, rattling and rolling –

a balancing crow hanging on

against the last storm

waiting for the new moon

energised, wound, unwounded, confused

and darkly black in the

low light of autumn silhouette

So Sue, that is how I wanted to know now

how

to know you

amongst the falling November leaves.

The day Sue died we were in northern Vietnam. An idyllic wooden hut overlooking the paddy fields

It poured with rain

We had sex.

Ventured out a little bit on some wonky pushbikes along paths cut into the edges of the flooded fields

Soaked to the skin we peeled off our clothes

Had more sex

And some more

Sated we slept in the next morning

Next day, I was first up and pulling back the mosi net I flicked open my laptop to see what was going on in the world

And saw Glenn's post¹⁰

A sense of free-fall

So far away.

I got pregnant that day and for a while I felt like there was some balance in the world - one in, one out

And then I wasn't pregnant any more

And Sue still had gone...

¹⁰ Email from Glenn Hall, Sue's husband January 10, 2017

One in, one out. Tired tears gathered and fell as they spoke of satiated sex, procreation and loss upon loss. Collaborated felt sense¹¹ spilled in the space between – the Flotex could take the strain – encouraging Sue to join us, emergent amongst our art materials and images. Layers of print, traces of previous transfer created, rolled and revealed. Life leaving embers while ashes blow in the wind, these bellows of creative endeavour feeding the glowing fires of re-membering.

It takes some energy, this spiriting of time together, of bringing the past and wrapping it carefully in the present. I imagine this rubber-sheet plane of my present moment shaped, contorted by the intervention of the experienced, and yet unseen presence of Sue passing through, stopping in that instant before moving on, tossing vitality affect (Stern, 2004) through the folds of time.

This weekend your hand resting warmly in the small of my back is sorely missed

I miss you

I miss your gravelly soft voice making a sardonic comment here and there

I miss your sideways glances twinkling across the room

I miss those defining eyebrows.

¹¹ Eugene Gendlin (1962; 1984), developing Carl Rogers' humanistic understanding of human being, suggested that by focusing on the 'felt sense' we experience physiologically in our bodies we can access 'the more', the additional understanding of the nature of our moment-by-moment embodied existence normally kept outside of our immediate awareness. In the context of collaborative writing groups, see also the concept of 'Gerald' (e.g. Speedy, 2005) and broader concepts of co-presence etc. in Gallant et al., 2014.

So there you are; words are indeed obfuscating, and yet apparently less so than just images (that are unlanguage? Is that a word?) The traces, the layers that print methods leave, the multiplicities of images.

My dream in the night, was of the labyrinth, built outside this place where we are staying, writing, creating, remembering Sue. But in the dream it had been built upon a swimming pool, as a means of filling in the space, of changing its purpose. It was only half built though and water seeped up around the stones, as if the decision to put it there was tentative, or recent, or an unhappy one. A single woman lived in the house, and looked back on the life within it, as she stared out of the back door toward the water-logged muddle, the rocky maze. She had arranged the changes that were made. They were to say that things were not the same, and would not be the same again. I watched the woman, me a floating dreamer, and her a solid, dark, rather curvaceous, painterly figure. If she was sad she did not want anyone to know that. She had decided not to be. And she was someone who believes such things can be decided. She had covered the pool with a labyrinth. A riddle to wander within, a spiritual journey, in place of the play the pool had signified, invited. All gone now; over with. I had arrived somewhere new, only to witness an ending.

Collaborative writing can be a messy business: hidden red lines in the sand may be crossed, and buttons pushed with explosive results. The dynamics of a supposedly leaderless and potentially rudderless gaggle of ‘creatives’ sparks with energy and potential.

‘Messiahs’ are thrown up in order to be shot down; a common enemy set against an indulgent and bountiful carer; the pre-conscious striving for trust and safety in a single partner within a potentially dangerous tribe (Bion, 1961). There are the maintenance needs of the group and the individual needs of group members as well as the (apparently) agreed task we have set ourselves (Adair, 1973). We noticed how this time it seemed to be different. Put simply, we seemed to be getting on better together, supporting each other more in our explorations of grief.

We are all here collectively together in Remembering Sue, knowing there are so many different ways to ‘know’ someone and somehow energetically giving space so that all have their own authentic experience with the ‘memory work’ (Haug et al., 1987). And as time goes on, for many it is through the art that we move forward, explore unspoken emotions, embody our own journey with Sue, now, then and in the future. I wonder if the art can give an illusion of an invisibility cloak (Rowling 1997), a place to play and print and make ... not give words.

It is a new day. This morning we made art rather than words. It is a way of externalising our emotion, giving it distance so that we can look back at ourselves with some new perspective. Sue took herself to the 32nd century to look back on her place in the 21st century (see Kirkpatrick et al., 2021). We looked at visual images. Talking about our art-making we notice and put words to them. We talk about words; their impossibility, their irrelevance, their intrusion,

their necessity. People feel differently. About words. And about Sue. But as we share what we have written, we begin to feel together. It begins to come alive, the grieving. And in coming alive we want to finish, to end for now, to shut it down this emotion, this physicality, this visceral process. I wonder about the body; the asset that becomes a liability, all the more precious as the vulnerability increases. It reminds us of Sue's body, of pain, of carrying on. Until she didn't.

Sunday 26th November 2017: 10.45am

This morning there was frost
coating the cars outside
a shock behind the curtain

This morning at breakfast
some told tales
of evening encounters

This morning
we found ourselves talking
with yesterday's pages and colours and textures between us

a tumble, a weeping
of love and joy and loss and struggle

This morning, this slow-slipped morning

this slow-slipped morning with Sue

with Sue

mourning Sue.

The art contains fragments; new ideas that contain something of the old. What was present peeling away, until the remnants slip to the ground, or blown away on the breeze, or simply aren't there anymore. I think about the process of re-absorption, into the whole, of integration into us. I did not know what would happen when I offered up this process but I did know it's potential for trace, repetition – 'yet each retracing is an original' (Ingold, 2000/01).

Still stuttering. We are stuttering slowly forward as much as we are still. Still stuttering.

There is much stillness in what happens here, much silence in our talking, which may get lost in the writing or in the doing; I counted 35 ticks at some point this morning, and if you add in the 35 tocks that is quite a long time for nine people to be silent.

I wasn't expecting a writing retreat on remembering Sue to be so difficult. We gather and we talk, and write, and make art, as we've done many times before, all in Sue's memory and yet we seem, more than a day into the retreat, to still be stuttering a slow way forward.

Time past, time present¹² and time arsing about ... reflecting on images laid out

In the ecotone, stepping through the no-mans-land

Are we in the river or now in the estuary

The marginal spaces

Yet the motion from rolling, cutting, observing and the perspiration from practice

Keeps going

The energy changes

The words shared earlier

The grief left hanging in the air

Now shaken slightly and becoming

Rewritten

Or re-drawn.

Caught by the richness, the subtle connection of image and process but also how that process has shifted with each person, the 'serious play' (Schechner, 1993). The anxiety, the uncomfortable-ness, the frustration of working with and around people outweighed in this moment by the visual diversity, depth, texture, of multiples spilled over the floor.

Most of our talking (and writing, and arting, and doing and playing) revolves around Sue, but it is ten months on from when she quietly slipped away and we occasionally

¹² This the start of a line from T.S Eliot's *Four Quartets* (2009/1943).

acknowledge that this is happening today against the backdrop of other big things going on for us right now - and here we are, remembering Sue.

Sue's voice was one I admired so much. Quiet, beautiful, noticing the details, summing up. Being rude at just the right moments. The text message that pinged on my phone 3 weeks after you died, telling me how happy you were floating on the boat and how you'd eaten all the cake and can I just say I don't believe in life after death but I knew it was from you anyway. DylanThomasyblackbroilingsortofaway, it's all gone in an instant, in the wink of an eye, in a ping of a ring of a phone. And my mind fills with holes, cutout, cutup, and all the meaning leaks out on to the Flotex.

There is a sorrowful statue outside the Russell Room. It has been sitting there all on its own for years, its head bowed down, buried in its folded arms. The small fountain at its feet may have tried to cheer the statue up but by now it, too, has given up and stands still, its idle presence reminiscent of the jollity that might have once been. I want to bring the statue in, welcome it into our fold and ask it to write of its pain with us. It, too, has known Sue. I want to hug it, to make it feel better, but know it's too cold and set in its ways to lift its head up and smile.

It's hard grieving, delving, stepping into the space

The void and getting lost there

The art helps

Slowly rebuilding life, diffracted slightly to what it was before

Each print, and cut moving a step further out of the

Emptiness

A remembering and forgetting

How long can a wake go on?

Three days, ten chapters?

A book and a year?

As the hours passed with intense reflection by day and rumination by night, the supportive environment fed soul-searching and day-dreaming, and we sought familiar comfort blankets of our pasts. And yet we were not altogether calm and contemplative. There was an edgy energy, a dissonant tension, more within our individual bodies than between members of the group. We found ourselves digging into our own personal repositories of loss, trauma, passing and rupture. Searching for wholesome and satisfying gestalts, hoping in our structure-seeking minds to find a familiar pattern, a convenient suspension file in which to hold safely (in suspense) the truths of our intersecting experiences, to close the drawer of our filing cabinet long enough to take breath and re-energise our spirits. These personal patterns of grief and loss spilled into our writing, and we recognised how we were supporting each other, honouring the intensity of others' grief, hearing with our open eyes and ears (and even our eyebrows perhaps?) the raw emotion of the words we had scribed and subsequently read aloud to each other. These stories have not appeared in this narrative, for this is our biography of Sue, not a record of every word and image shared within that powerful long weekend.

By attending to the needs of individuals and the group, recognising the inevitable dynamics of such gatherings and their developing process (Rogers, 1970), we were able to allow the intrusion of Sue into the images and words of our minds as we relaxed further into this 'safe space'.

Sunday 26th November: 3.50pm

Echoes back, echoes forward, life is a succession of moments - I like the confusion - we are performing our loss. I tell myself off for allowing such a drift away from here and now,

this collective of explorers into life and death.

Sue found Jonathan in the wood today and got a lift back with him

Stumbling through the sticky, clarty mud

He almost fell over her

He picked her up

Unfurled her in the palm of his hand and holding her close

Safely nestled her in his pocket

for the long walk back to Ammerdown.

Now she lies, still slightly sticky on the Flotex

A piss-poor framing

Straight legs

Bent legs

Blue legs

So many legs

A muddy path

Somewhere a chair could not go

Out-of-bounds to Sue once

Was in bounds again

Those legs

Those dogs

Sue

On a walk?

Echoes back, echoes forward.

LOVE

Love for Sue and for this process of collaborative inquiry

I am seeing the magic begin to happen

My hands are twitching wanting to be playing with the black ink

To bring a dark, dusky agency to my side of the assemblage of art that grows in the centre of the room

Inspired by others creations and words

I want to make more

Make more art

Make more meaning

Into this space.

Echoes back, echoes forward.

Sue is lying on the floor, a little contorted, a black and white representation of her whole self.

The Inspector takes a step back.

'Where's the evidence then, constable?' she inquires. 'What the fuck's gone on here?'

'Well, that's the interesting thing ma'am,' says the constable, 'it appears to be still going on now!'

'Indeed ...?'

'The protagonist, a label called Sue, has intervened in her own investigation and, to put it bluntly, I can't help thinking we're in danger of getting hoist on a petard¹³ or two ...'

The inspector is shaking her head.

'Come on constable,' she says, 'you know better than this – concrete evidence, concrete evidence is the name of the game. What are the objects saying to us; where are they? And where the fuck's the CSI?'¹⁴

'They came and went ma'am – said they couldn't find anything that would stand up in court – said it's down to us.'

'Typical – no-one taking responsibility, no-one got the answers – the label just appeared you said?'

'Yes ma'am, apparently just grew out of the soil underfoot!'

'Well, what the fuck now then?'

Echoes back, echoes forward

I do like a good murder

And so I learn did Sue

A good

¹³ "Hoisted by one's own petard" is an old English saying that means injured by the device that you intended to use to injure others.

¹⁴ Crime Scene Investigation.

Murder of crows.

Echoes back, echoes forward.

Back in the room Jonathan tells us of how he found a piece of paper in the mud and he places it on the floor. It's a sticky label with a hand written S U E on it and we make another collective noise this time an in breath, a taking in, a breath, a Sue breath.

He came back from the pub with you in his pocket. Carol came back from the woods with muddy dog paw prints right up her legs ... no I don't want to tell you about what we've been doing, after all, if you still exist in any shape or form, you already know that. I want to ask you what you would do now ... I'd suggest you'd stay with the confusion ... you'd enjoy the confusion and smile, which would, about now, be giving you a bit of a headache.

It's interesting to see how different people respond to not knowing what the fuck to do, what the fuck is going on, and to wonder whether these are to do with what's happening now, or to do with our personal and professional histories. Are we experiencing 'disciplined' confusions?

Sing a song of Ammerdown a pocket full of Alys¹⁵

Four red dogs and 9 crows ate a lemon curdy pie

When the pie was eaten the birds began to sing

¹⁵ 'Pocket' refers to an earlier collaborative writing retreat where the theme was pockets (reference required).

Oh wasn't that a collaborative dish to set in memory of Sue

Sue was in her heaven house looking out the window

Jon was in the Kitchen eating all the food

The maid¹⁶ was in the garden hanging out the knickers

When down came a cormorant and dried its wing pits

Image 10. Drawing (Tessa Wyatt).

¹⁶ A Cornish term of endearment.

The surprising, even discombobulating, intervention of the still-sticky name label 'SUE' acted as an extreme example of the agency of objects. As it lay on the floor amongst our art-making its revenant power made more sense of our visceral experience, the felt sense of absence and the search for representative objects: an additional diffraction grating (Barad, 2003) through which to peer into the traces of Sue's passing through us all.

Sunday November 26th 2017: 4.40pm

What is the nature of collaborative grieving?

I am thinking about grieving, and the process of meaning reconstruction (Neimeyer 2002) and us here, trying to construct this process as we go. Should there be audio of this discussion now, to help us remember what to write? Sue did that. Sue's input, missing, seems to call for some reconfiguration of the group. A reconfiguration not from what was but from what might have been. An imaginary present based on memories of how it has been. Gaps arise, unexpectedly, or perhaps they are obvious. What is happening here today is we are carrying on. Without Sue. An expectation of going on being alive. Even though we know we will all die.

How do we grieve? How do we remember? Are we doing it right? Are we doing it? Is this grieving? Is that the same as remembering Sue? And close around lurking just out of sight are other losses. Some are in the room, others unspoken still. Should we let them in? And then there is theory. The question of whether we ought to do this more properly. With some acknowledgement of theoretical, methodological ancestry. What would it be? A bit of this and that? How do we integrate all this? Are we moving backward or forward? Is this

moment part of it? And as I look again at the art on the floor I am aware of the energy being evoked.

Grief - what does it look like? Enrobed in grief

Like a coat? Or encased in warm sticky pudding

Hard to write now. We speak here of loss and pain and we know little of each other. We are strangers. I realise I know nothing of you, or you of me. Yet my heart leaps with sadness for each of your losses each of your sadnesses. We are here to mourn not one death, not one loss but many. All the liquid in my body is gathering towards my eyes and nose, a pouring out and a dribble.

We are speaking of loss and uncertainty, of not knowing, of the sadness we carry and what more we will certainly meet.

It is what it is to be alive.

And words don't and pictures don't and tears don't.

And even this feeling that is my feeling about you doesn't.

I miss you.

I am wearing the earrings

I bought in Spain because

they reminded me of yours

and yesterday I asked Glenn if

I could have your silver leafy earrings

because then I would have something of yours to wear

things

these are not just things

they are YOUR things

they have their own agency

they have a particular power, a materiality, a secret multi-storied life of their own

These kind of ideas are talked about these days by the likes of Bradotti (2006) and Barad (2007), as post structuralist, post-human ideas; they are referred to as the 'new materialities' ... but their substance carries traces of very old ways of knowing about the power of things.

A continuity, a multiplicity, a liveliness, a loveliness, a loneliness, a gathering sense of being held in a shared space, ships passing in the night, the green light blobs on the radar, just enough to know they are there now, and then gone, passing, influencing our journeys without the crashing crushing intersection of us-ness. I am moved by others' emotive connections, and setting that against the humour inherent in my own 'you're in danger of going up your own arse'.

They speak of 'dark dusky agency': it brings me in contact with the energy of the shadow and the illicit, the necessity of the hidden or the forbidden. Sue had access to that - a dark dusky agency.

I want to write about rituals, the ritual we are creating here – giving the time and the space to be, remember, laugh, cry, create. The spontaneous creation of ritual; the fears - that we don't know, have forgotten, the way to do meaning-making rituals. I remember the bodily sensation – tentativeness, sensing and observing those around and of the power of being. I remember the tentative stepping into and walking the labyrinth.

We all bring our assumptions, our own 'rule book' of how collaborative writing is done, based on past experiences and our daily work roles. A professional artist may privilege one aspect more than an academic or psychotherapist, may indeed remember differently 'how it is done'. And yet there is an intense quality of attention when our purpose is shared. We do find that intensity alone, but there is the additional commitment, expectation and warmth of others being in the same physical space all agreeing to do this – to write and create, allow one's thoughts and ideas to bleed into. To reverberate with, a recognition of tribe. One of our tribe is dead, others are absent. Adjusting to change is uncomfortable, spiked with ire and frustration, and weary acceptance that we are not in control. Might collaborative grieving simply be re-membering (Myerhoff, 1986; White, 1997; Hedtke & Winslade, 2004); reconfiguration of our tribe?

Monday Morning, November 27th 2017

This has all been written sitting on hard chairs or the even harder ground. I wonder how that has influenced our writing. But we've been here before at Ammerdown. That was a very intimate love making – no, love-*aching* – kind of process, for a Sue that was still alive and well.

Each of us holding other dead loves in our memories. Each step taking us nearer to our own death. Will you think of me? Will you think of we? Of us when we are gone?

So, to return to this last write – Sue, you, you a part with us; what is the contract here? I didn't get a chance to negotiate that before you went. You thrust me into this uncertain position of power. What is the dynamic of being amongst, of belonging without having material contact? What a simplistic view of material contact, and a glimpse of anger: 'You thrust me ...' could be experienced as my lack of agency, I didn't choose you to go, to leave. You had to leave it seems, only partially known (how could it ever be other?) You speak, mediated by strands of colour, swirling across paper, now digitized, ossified until corrupted in the Cloud or manipulated by hands of gods choosing how to see and how to hear and how to maintain a fluid homeostasis of this.

The art I am making is me - but there wouldn't have been any crows if it hadn't been for this group, this time and Sue. There wouldn't have been the sticky, velvet black, the magic that happened as the factory art self-spun into action - dusky black had agency. I have been using so much colour recently it has been a refreshing contrast to use the black ink. To be searching through to the dark side, playing with the grief in the room, channeling it through a sticky velvet dusky black. Death and crows and Sue. The collaborative knot of entangled lives that is our existence. Touching upon, rubbing up against, influencing, nurturing, scarring, warming, changing; each one glowing for a moment, then gone, separately and together.

This morning sometimes I heard people's words but they seemed to have too many different interpretations, not necessarily those meant by the speaker. What does it mean to collaborate? I assumed we would write into the writing, write into the art. To merge and swirl the images into a coherent whole - my assumption.

We've struggled over what it looks like to collaborate, what collaboration does; what erasures, what cuts, what belongings, what acknowledgements, we assume, make explicit, negotiate, concede. We've noted the significance of histories and their acknowledgements and belongings, their cuts and erasures. What's here and not here. What's lost. What's retrievable. What's redeemable. What's not.

The parallel process of Melissa, who left early, speaking from the grave to those left behind I have a sense of privilege in being amongst the remaining, and also of being able to hear the voice of one who mourns the loss. Perhaps a sense of derealisation as I ponder over whether I am one of the dying or one of the living ... and yet there is a part of me that wants to be clear that I am living because I am a-part. I am living because of my presence as a separate part. So to hear Melissa (mediated through time, space, the written word and another's voice before I even get a chance to bend it to my own world-view), as apart from this collective, is at once confusing and valuable in order to define in some way the permeable boundaries of understanding, being and belonging.

The pictures and the art equipment is all packed up

Housekeeping has taken up most of the morning, we have been

Clarifying the role of the group and

Photographing the prints.

I found talking as individuals about this harder than the writing, reading aloud and talking about Sue.

I'd have liked to go to Sue's house

I heard so much about it

And that stained glass window

Their design growing in the artist's studio

The beauty of the window, the story that it captured

That has agency and the window lives on and in and through Sue,

She is the window, but so is the artist and the glass

And glass moves - slowly but over time it begins to slide, pool away

Changing, living beyond the maker, the dream, the composition

Remembering with motion

And that home, Sue's home, Sue's window changes

As new people move into the space

But the presence, the energy still seeps and flows

The matter of the place, the home, the window, Sue, give agency to whoever

lives there next

And my home

I like the intrigue and the unexpected

But not things or people dropping dead

Drop, dead, gorgeous

Coda

I have left the group early, re-entering the world of black country roads and city streets, children, a house that hasn't been cleaned. I wanted to write again because now I feel like one of the refracted images from the floor. A crow? A dog? An old pair of knickers? I have enacted absence and yet I am still present somewhere in the world, still here to wonder if you notice the blank space I have left there.

I realise now how deep we had sunk, how far into whatever it was, that we were. How closely we had edged up to the pain of loss. How we had, somehow, in that higgledy process, opened up a space for sharing in grief. And how hard it now is to explain that space I have been in, sharing. It felt simple. But here on the outside, it is quickly an experience that I cannot discuss. Here it makes no sense¹⁷.

The gallows depths are close at hand and it is time to say whatever is left to be said. All of it. Out. Now. And tomorrow you will give it a final glance, one more going over perhaps, before you parcel it up, pack it away, stick it somewhere safe for when the next moment comes, the moment when you will take it all back out and try to understand it again.

¹⁷ We have struggled as to how to explain being here to those not? (note the implication that we are still 'here' that simply slipped out of my writing consciousness. This retreating space in which we have all come forward and shared the intimacy and vulnerability of writing, listening, eating, being together. I think of the story 'Explaining death to the dog?' (Perabo, 2000) - something that feels impossible. It will be in the words - an essence, a maturation of the experience of being together.

What is there.

What is there?

What is there.

**Addendum, several years later, mid-way through our research network's
interrogation of ethical know-how in collaborative writing/editing:**

As we guide you as our reader to join our original workshop, what we have shared here is through the lens of the Edinburgh collective. We met in the snow and biting winds of Edinburgh in February 2018. We added our extra layers of meaning and serious play as we separated the writings of others between munching on chocolate brownies and trips up the street for coffee. The process of moving the 'outcomes' of a collaborative writing retreat to the form of a book (Kirkpatrick et al., 2021) and this paper allows for the agency of the writing beyond the original authors and their context. The Edinburgh collective collaged the work through an ethic of care, hoping to give an account of what took place: hoping to re-member Sue. We were all present and occupying a relational space. We all were part of each other's work which goes beyond the written word on the page as it was a sensitive process, which touched deep emotions in each of us and sometimes triggered memories of other losses. By the end of the Ammerdown weekend our workshop was filled with the dead in all our lives, which the Edinburgh collective edited out in order to focus on 'remembering Sue'.

This radical idea of multiple processes, beings, complex relationality happening at the same time is unsettling and unfamiliar, even if our understanding of collaborative writing or of any writing, is that none of us 'own' the outcome, which may have a vibrant life and

agency of its own. We needed to give ourselves permission to cut and stick and play with everybody's words and images and also, perhaps, leave space for those not there to feed back in. A trick we missed in this process (due to both financial and temporal limitations) is not to have come back together as a group of nine again: an iterative process beyond event and editing. To have taken this amount of care, takes more time than we had, and perhaps more facilitation, and less shared grief than we experienced. However, here we share what the Edinburgh collective created, and in this postscript, we have added a critique to perhaps what was missing in the book chapter we produced (see Chapter 7 in Kirkpatrick et al., 2021).

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