

*Dragonfly: A Novel and Poetics*  
(Poetics only)

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## **Dedication**

For my mum and brother

– and in memory of my dad who left us during the writing of this.

## **Declaration**

This thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted in any form for the award of a higher degree at any other educational institution.

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## Abstract

Andrea Ashworth, PhD Creative Writing, *Dragonfly: A Novel and Poetics*

This thesis contains a novel, which is a creative response to the science and mythology of the dragonfly, and a poetics which considers the writing of the novel in entomological terms.

The novel features the dragonfly – including entomological detail such as life-cycle, biology, behaviour – in a deeply embedded way, such that both story and structure are influenced by the insect. *Dragonfly* features three narratives, all of which engage with themes of bereavement and loss with the narratives coalescing towards the end. The main character, a boy called Henry, has experienced the recent loss of his mother and is struggling to connect with his father who has turned to alcohol as a way to cope with the loss of his wife. A woman called Clara introduces Henry to dragonflies, with their friendship leading him and his father to recovery from the destructive nature of grief. A secondary narrative from the point of view of CB explores her own experiences of loss through her father's diagnosis of dementia. A third narrative from the point of view of the dragonflies intersects with these narratives while highlighting the insects' own story. This structure allows for thematic links between the narratives to be explored, with the creation of resonance and depth attempted through the use of echo and repetition.

The 'Dragonfly Poetics' is a creative–critical exploration of the writing process at a time of bereavement, drawing on the dragonfly as a source of inspiration for both form and content. In this, I adopt an ecocritical perspective to consider the nature of writing, in particular how my writing of the novel, especially whilst bereaved, can be seen to be entomological in nature. I also consider how the dragonfly suggests a framework for my own grief, as well as that of my character Henry. Further, the poetics explores the symbiotic nature of writing, particularly with regard to the growth and development of

the novel, as well as notions of merging in relation to the writer (Self) and character (Other), and how bereavement is the instigator of this process.

As a whole, the creative work and poetics contribute to contemporary approaches to writing that is inspired by insects, forming new understanding about how they can influence both form and content at a deep level in both creative and critical outputs.

Keywords: creative writing, fiction, novel, poetics, insects, bereavement, ecofiction, ecocriticism, human–animal studies

## Dragonfly Poetics

Dragonfly, n. *The common name for neuropterous insects of the group Libellulina, characterized by a long, slender body, large eyes, and two pairs of large reticulated wings, and by their strong, swift flight.*

(Oxford English Dictionary)<sup>1</sup>

*The eyes of the adult dragonflies are the largest among insects. As the eyes surround the head, dragonflies are able to see in front, to the side and behind all at the same time.*

(Brooks and Cham, 2014: 8)

*It's very hard to say why I feel so deeply about dragonflies, but, to me, looking at one of these astonishing insects is like looking up at a star.*

(Mackenzie Dodds, 2014: 293)

*As soon as we're here, we disappear like dragonflies*

(Eddi Reader, 'Dragonflies')<sup>2</sup>



(Photo of a brown hawker used with kind permission of Janice Sutton of the Lancashire Dragonfly Group)

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<sup>1</sup> Available from <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/57434?redirectedFrom=dragonfly#eid> [accessed 2 February 2021]

<sup>2</sup> From the album *Love is the Way* (Eddi Reader, 2009, Rough Trade Records; written by Boo Hewerdine). Permission for use of quote given by Chrysalis/BMG.



## Introduction

It begins with an encounter.

It is 20 July 2014 and I am standing in – of all places – the queue of Superdrug in the Yorkshire town I am living in with my then boyfriend. I am waiting to be served, my bag over my shoulder, arms full of toiletries. I am a little bored perhaps, eager to get out and back into the sunshine so that I can enjoy the walk back home in the heat.

Whatever the reason, I stop staring at the back of the person in front of me and look over towards the sliding glass doors which are open as someone enters, someone else leaves. I vaguely register other shoppers, the glint of light from a car, the to-ing and fro-ing of bodies beyond the glass doors. But then, something else captures my attention, something that has intruded on this very urban setting and which should not be here. I have glimpsed it in my peripheral vision but now I look up to the ceiling to where it is, and jump, almost dropping one of the items I'm holding. 'Oh,' I say, then realise where I am, cheeks warming with self-consciousness. I try to gauge if anyone else is seeing it, to check nobody has heard me or noticed me jump. They haven't. I search for it again, mesmerised by this creature, long and dark and hovering; silent and dramatic as a stealth plane. It is still there, yes. Watching us all.

I become aware there is a space at the till then and move forward, tightening my hold on the toiletries before letting them fall to the counter. As the woman scans the items, I turn again and look up, searching for this unexpected visitor once more; to marvel at its size, its quietness, its boldness in coming into a shop that contains all these much bigger humans. There is 'a sense of wonder and care' (Oerlemans, 2018: 138) in me as I stand there, something which Onno Oerlemans says is 'evidence that our own bodies yearn for contact with, or at least direct awareness of, other bodies, including those of nonhuman animals' (2018: 138). The ceiling is white, blank though. There is nothing

there now but square tiles and lights. I check above, behind, over at the furthest corners of the shop, but it is clear that what was here has gone. In the time it took me to turn away and step towards the counter – a second or two – the dragonfly decided it wanted to leave and now it has gone.

This is not the end of a story though. In fact, it is just the beginning of one; because the dragonfly that was here has left me with something – something more than just the image of it, the dark against the white. It is the idea for a story – boy, woman, dragonfly. The story of a young boy who has recently lost his mother but who will become friends with a woman who knows a lot more about dragonflies than I do. It is a story of loss and bereavement, friendship and ultimately hope – and I know as I stand here that it is a story that must be told. And that I am the one who must tell it.

### ***Encountering***

Dragonflies. An unexpected encounter. The feeling of intuition that the seed of a moment will grow into something more. This was my experience of really seeing a dragonfly for the first time many years ago now, the impact this had: the bringing of a story, the intuition there was an idea here worth pursuing. It was a moment that stayed with me for a long time before I began work on what would eventually become the novel that forms the creative portion of this thesis; a moment that lasted seconds and which, to somebody else, may not have signified anything. To me, though, it has dictated the course of my life over the past few years.

There are others who have had similar experiences with these beautiful but alien creatures. Take British naturalist Ruary Mackenzie Dodds for instance. He had his own encounter with a dragonfly a number of years ago and this then became the catalyst for him to change his life entirely. As he writes in his memoir *The Dragonfly Diaries*:

A dragonfly lands on my shirt, and three things happen, lightning fast. *One*: I don't really like insects, but I'm completely comfortable with this amber-black thing sitting above my heart. *Two*: I actually look at a dragonfly, properly, for the first time in my life. It's beautiful. I feel a strange sense of wonder. *Three*: the dragonfly says, "Why not photograph dragonflies?" and vanishes in a whirr of wings.

I'm left with the oddest feeling... It's... I don't know. Something a bit like a déjà-vu, but not. An intuition?

(Mackenzie Dodds, 2014: 3)

This moment and the feeling of 'intuition' that accompanies it is significant for Mackenzie Dodds. He does not like insects and yet, in an instant, he is drawn into the world of the dragonfly – a world he knows nothing about. He has been captured, caught by a sense of wonder and intrigue. And even though he cannot even differentiate between dragonflies and damselflies at first, it is not long before he can. In fact, he is so drawn into their world that he evolves from businessman to passionate dragonfly conservationist, even fronting the creation of Europe's first dragonfly sanctuary at Ashton Water in Northamptonshire in 1991, followed by The National Dragonfly Museum in 1995 and then The Dragonfly Centre at Wicken Fen, Cambridgeshire in 2009. His experience with the dragonfly leads him from no knowledge to becoming one of the UK's foremost dragonfly experts, such that he is even awarded the 'Order of the Geek' by naturalist and presenter Chris Packham because of his passion for the insect

(Packham, 2016). The dragonfly has changed him. And all because of one single encounter.

\*

This may be wrong, but I do not recall ever having encountered a dragonfly before the experience I outline at the start of this section. I had seen them represented in art, on cards, as pieces of jewellery, but it was the real physical presence of them that had somehow eluded me up to that point. As someone who has only engaged with and become more interested in the natural world in recent years, it is understandable, to me at least, why I might not have encountered any before then. Being from a working class background, and playing in the streets rather than the countryside as a child, I have no recollection of seeing them or being in a place – near ponds, rivers or lakes – where the opportunity might have arisen to spot them. Even now I question myself: surely I must have seen a dragonfly before the age of forty-one, as I was in 2014? How is it possible I might not have? Whatever the reason for this black hole in my bank of knowledge and experience, it is clear I had either never seen a dragonfly in the real world before, or I had but without any recollection of having done so; something which is difficult to believe, especially considering how striking these ‘dazzling jewelled creature[s] borne on shining wings’ are (Taylor, 2013).

Whether I had seen one before or not, my encounter with the dragonfly in the shop created a change in my internal atmosphere – a flickering within; something I recognised as a kind of creative potential. I know because I have experienced this feeling before, many times. One instance was when I saw photographer Casey Orr’s ‘Bone Fire’ exhibition<sup>3</sup> in Yorkshire many years ago, with its images of teenagers building bonfires. Something about standing in front of those photos and seeing the

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.caseyorr.com/bone-fire> [accessed 16 June 2021].

stance and expression of one teenage boy in particular – edgy, confrontational – struck me, making something spark into being. The outline for the story of a troubled teenage boy who builds a bonfire in the basement of his school arrived in that moment, and I was so indebted to Orr’s exhibition that I even named the piece that emerged following that encounter with her work after it (see ‘Bone Fire’ in Ashworth, 2011).

This registering of creative potential is reminiscent of what artist Kathleen Vaughan refers to as an ‘inner quickening’ (Vaughan, 2009: 167) – a feeling which happens in reply to the unexpected impact of an external stimulus; something I interpret as an internal pricking up of the ears, where the body becomes alert to possibility and begins to ready itself for action: an artistic call and response. For Vaughan, who writes about her experience with this in *Practice-Led Research, Research-Led Practice in the Creative Arts*, this happened while she was out and saw a poster of ‘vivid oranges a brilliant, tropical contrast to the city’s winter greys’ with the caption: ‘Papillons en liberté’ (Butterflies go free) (2009: 166). Vaughan explains how this poster led to an image forming in her mind of butterflies in ‘dull dove greys and bluish-mauves, shading into velvet blacks... the mental image of art that I might make’ (2009: 167). She describes her physical reaction to this as ‘a kind of stomach pang’, which is something she has felt before and which to her is ‘an indication that there is depth and density of *creative potential* in the idea or image that has come’ (Vaughan, 2009: 167; my emphasis). A recognition of artistic possibility.

My reaction to the dragonfly was similar and because of my own previous experiences where I have recognised creative potential and then acted on it successfully – as in, it has led to the creation of a short story or a novel – I knew there was ‘depth and density’ (Vaughan, 2009: 167) here for me also. I had no understanding of what the insect’s fictional potential might be. I just felt that it was there.

What is interesting is that this feeling of intuition about a particular idea is a recognisable starting point to the process for many writers, as well as artists more

broadly. For Vaughan with her butterflies, her reaction is like a ‘summons’ that ‘hurtles [her] forward into unexpected imaginings, or to a deeply felt inner experience’ – a summons that ‘does not come just once, to kick start a body of work, but can recur throughout the entire process of making’ (2009: 167). Hanif Kureishi suggests that writers might not know why they are drawn to a particular idea ‘until the story has been written, if then’ (2014: 17). He goes on to suggest that while writers might have some intuitive sense to work on a specific idea, the veracity behind this feeling can only be proved by starting to write – but that even then, what emerges may not be all that the writer hopes and expects:

There is a sense – there has to be a sense – in which most writers do not entirely understand what they are doing. You suspect there might be something you can use. But you don’t know what it is. You have to find out by beginning. And what you discover probably will not be what you originally imagined or hoped for. (Kureishi, 2014: 17)

In my own situation, the idea that came following my encounter – of a boy, a woman and dragonflies, all linked to the child’s recent bereavement – was so striking that I made a note of it on my phone, a note that exists to this day:

Boy’s pov [point of view ]– kick, spit, heave. The man...  
spitting with drink. Get out, boy. Get fucking out.  
Boy being brought up by father who can’t cope after  
death of wife.

Woman in care home with dragonfly tattoo.

Being cared for and woman uncovering her story.

Young woman out in field investigating dragonflies.

Boy and young woman meet out in field.

Old woman visited by boy grown up. (Note, 20 July  
2014)

While there are a number of elements which did not last beyond the note or the first draft of the novel – the hardness to the language, the father’s darkness and in particular the idea of having a narrative with Clara and Henry in later life – the bones of the novel as it is now can still be picked out: boy’s point of view, the father who has turned to drink because he can’t cope with the loss of his wife, the young woman out in the field investigating dragonflies, the boy and the young woman who meet.

At the time, of course, I did not know how much or how little of my original conception of the novel might survive into a final draft – indeed, I did not know if there would even be a final draft. The fears I had about beginning to embark on the writing journey, hinted at by Kureishi with his highlighting of the potential *negative* disparity between idea and expression, can be salvaged somewhat by Canadian writer Johanna Skibsrud who agrees that there is ‘perhaps, a perpetual imbalance between the “inspiration” behind a work and what is eventually produced’ (Skibsrud, 2014: 41) but adds that writers need to have ‘faith’.

During the process of writing, when the work-in-progress often fails to convey *any* of its original intentions, the writer must sometimes be sustained by simple faith. A faith that, in the end, the process of

writing will result in a natural balance between  
inspiration and finished form. (Skibsrud, 2014: 41;  
emphasis in original)

The feeling I had when the dragonfly visited was similar to the ‘enthusiasm of practice’ that Brad Haseman, who wrote ‘A manifesto for performative research’, describes:

...many practice-led researchers do not commence a  
research project with a sense of ‘a problem’. Indeed they  
may be led by what is best described as ‘an enthusiasm  
of practice’: something which is exciting, something  
which may be unruly.... Practice-led researchers  
construct experiential starting points from which  
practice follows. They tend to ‘dive in’, to commence  
practising to see what emerges. They acknowledge that  
what emerges is individualistic and idiosyncratic.  
(Haseman, 2006)

And indeed this is how I felt: excited, alive. I wanted to ‘dive in’, to commence writing – I wanted to see what might emerge from it. What is it about the dragonfly that caused such a reaction in me though, that made me want to write the story that came with it? What is it that proves to be such a source of inspiration to those of us who have had such experiences with them?

This thesis emerges from my own encounter with a dragonfly and is an exploration of questions such as these. The resulting practice-based research forms a creative



response to the dragonfly, considering both the insect's entomology – life-cycle, biology, behaviour – as well as its mythology. The creative part of the thesis, a novel provisionally titled *Dragonfly*, attempts to incorporate the insect at a deep level, such that both the story and structure are influenced by it. The accompanying part, a poetics, is speculative in nature and is a creative–critical exploration of the writing process. As Robert Sheppard says: 'Poetics are the products of the process of reflection upon writings, and upon the act of writing, gathering from the past and from others, speculatively casting into the future' (Sheppard, 2002: 2). My own poetics will utilise the dragonfly to navigate and investigate what I perceive to be the entomological nature of novel writing.

Both elements are structured using the dragonfly's life-cycle, from 'Nymph' (when juvenile dragonflies live underwater) to 'Emergence' (when they leave the water and perform their final moult) to 'Adult' (when they are full grown and take to the skies), thereby linking the poetics to the creative project at a deep level. As the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) *Creative writing research benchmark statement* says, 'there is usually at least a symbiotic link between the two; they are often in dialogue with one another and in effect pose questions which are reciprocally addressed' (NAWE, 2018: 4). The primary research question explored in both elements of the thesis is: in what ways can the dragonfly inform the writing of a novel and poetics, and how has exploring this influenced my writing process and outputs? The thesis as a whole is an attempt to try and answer this question.

While the dragonfly is the primary focus of this research, both the novel and poetics also engage with bereavement, considering how writing while bereaved can lead to this seeping into the creative work, often unintentionally. Following the loss of my dad during this PhD, I explore how bereavement can be considered to be dragonfly-like in

nature, with the insect providing a framework for my own movement through grief, as well as that of my central character.

The novel itself is an exploration of childhood bereavement featuring Henry, a young boy who is struggling following the death of his mother and has become distanced from his father, who has begun drinking heavily because of loss. He meets a dragonfly enthusiast called Clara and it is through this friendship – and Henry’s learning about dragonflies – that he begins to come to terms with his bereavement. A secondary narrative centres on a character called CB dealing with her father’s decline as a result of dementia, and also features her memories of dragonfly hunting with him. A third strand is from the point of view of dragonflies and this interacts with the other narratives while also communicating the insect’s own story. Each of the storylines can be said to be in conversation with the other, whereby some aspect of Henry’s chapters, for example, is reflected in the subsequent CB section, and aspects of Arthur White’s Field Notes is reflected in, and has helped to generate, the accompanying CB section. The three narratives coalesce towards the end of the novel.

As for the poetics, the first part, ‘Nymph’, takes as its starting point Bertrand Gervais’s speculation that texts are so different to the readers who consume them that they are ‘Other’ and insect-like because of it (Gervais, 2006: 179–199). I then move this discussion on to consider the writer’s point of view and Zayneb Allak’s (2017) assertion that poems are Other but are instead spider-like rather than insect-like in the way they appear and behave, and that as a writer of them she is Other also. I broaden this discussion to consider the novel, and my own novel in particular, and how both writer and text can be said to be Other, although dragonfly-like rather than arachnid, with the process of composition being somewhat entomological in nature, from inception of idea through to realisation; and that in the early stages of writing both me and the novel are nymph-like in particular.

I also consider the observations and ideas of other writers and critics whose works intersect with my own, in particular with regard to how writing can be seen as an ecological process, including both symbolism and metaphor which I discuss here because of my deep interest in them. As well as considering the relationship between writer and text as a symbiotic one, I also explore how symbiosis, and merging, can be seen to take place between writer and the characters created, with bereavement the catalyst for this with regard to my own research; my own unexpected loss contributing to the imagined loss of my characters, with me and Henry in particular growing closer through our shared grief. I then analyse my own bereavement while making reference to the literature on grief, such as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's theory of the five stages of grief (2014) and Inge B. Corless et al.'s Languages of Grief Model (2014) and discuss how my own bereavement can be considered to be dragonfly-like in the way it functions and how I navigate my way through it.

In part two, 'Emergence', I discuss how moving onto a new draft of the novel is reminiscent of the dragonfly's emergence from the water to transform into an adult, with the novel becoming less watery and more grounded as a result. I consider synonyms of 'emergence' to analyse what *emerges* during the writing of the second draft, in particular the *appearance* of my dad in various ways, such as in the description and voice of a minor character, as well as in Henry's mother's illness. Again, I consider the bereavement literature, but this time with regard to ideas around relinquishing bonds with those lost (Freud, 1917) as well as more contemporary approaches such as the continuing bonds theory (Klass, Silverman and Nickman, 1996). I discuss how the continuing bonds model finds expression in the novel and how this relates to my own experience of grieving. I also explore the autobiographical elements which emerge without my intending them to and make reference to other writers who find this happens in their own writing during bereavement.

I then discuss the *arrival* of the dragonfly voice into the novel and how scientific research into the insect, in particular with regard to vision, helps to create this voice. I discuss Jakob von Uexküll's notion of the 'umwelt' – the idea of a creature's unique sensory experience of the world – and how this helps when considering dragonfly perception. I also consider ideas around anthropomorphism and the challenges faced with regard to this when trying to represent the point of view of a creature when limited by my own human perception.

In the final part, 'Adult: A Conclusion', I consider how this research has been a process of '*becoming*' (Morrison, 1993: 4) for both me and the novel, and how this has led to change in me as a result of writing but also because of bereavement. I discuss what 'adult' means in the context of writing and grief and also consider any limitations in my approach to this research. At the end of this section I begin to look to the future as a new life-cycle of writing begins.

The novel and poetics are closely aligned, in a process of exchange with each other, with the poetics, for example, speculating about process and the novel then acting on these speculations. Equally, aspects of the novel have fed into the critical element, for example with the utilisation of stages in the dragonfly life-cycle with regard to structure. The *Creative writing research benchmark statement* says that 'Reflection and critical insight may also be presented through inherently creative strategies that illuminate the main body of creative work' (NAWE, 2018: 8). As such the poetics often employs techniques used in fiction writing, for example the use of metaphor or creative syntax, in order to more closely align the two elements; meaning that both formal and creative non-fiction approaches are used intuitively and interchangeably throughout this section of the thesis.

## Nymph

*Dragonflies spend most of their lives in their larval [nymph] stage. During its time the dragonfly catches and eats live prey at every opportunity, moulting a further 5–14 times until it is fully-grown' (British Dragonfly Society, n.d.)*

I am as much a dragonfly nymph as it is possible to be. I am all potential, all idea: small and unrealised. I am a vessel for the versions of me that are yet to come into being as the novel takes shape. Writer as insect, as dragonfly nymph. As the novel grows, I will grow. As it sheds its skins, I will shed my own skins too. The nymph-text and nymph-novelist will reveal themselves to each other during the process of writing and editing in acts of continuous unveiling. Each becoming something other than they were.

Something more. Something less distinct, more hybrid. I am the text and the text is me. We are each other's stories. There is a symbiotic link between us, with one unable to exist without the other in this delicate stage of our development. Until one day I will shed it and it me for one final time, and we will be free of each other. The imprint of each of us still held somewhere within the other – in blood or bone, at the level of DNA perhaps, or in the wood of our own particular branches of the phylogenetic tree.

*Writer as insect.*

*Text as insect.*

\*

In his essay 'Reading as a close encounter of the third kind', Bertrand Gervais considers how texts that are read can be thought of as insects because of their 'Otherness', their difference to us. He says:

reading is an encounter between a reader and a  
fundamental otherness, that it is an encounter with an  
insect, an arthropod, a being with which we share  
neither the same body structure nor the same  
subjectivity. (Gervais, 2006: 179)

For Gervais, human readers are dissimilar to the texts they read: they have different shapes and perceptions. For him, the ‘reader and text possess a profoundly different nature one from the other’ (Gervais, 2006: 194), which means that when encountering the ‘fundamental otherness’ of a text, it is the same experience for the reader as when they encounter the Otherness of an insect: an alien, non-human entity. Gervais argues that, because of this, the insect can be used as ‘a metaphor to describe how texts are read’ (2006: 179), with the insect-text ‘a being whose otherness is great, and whose body answers to different formal principles’ (2006: 194) when compared with our own human bodies. Gervais says there is a way for a connection to be made though, for communication to take place between these two very different animals of reader and text. In order to understand the ‘fundamental otherness’ of a text, he says it must be listened to:

To understand a text means to tame it, to work to  
decipher it; it means to listen to it, not as we would hear  
another person’s words, in a simple act of  
communication, but as we listen to the cicada’s song or  
the humming of a mosquito. (Gervais, 2006: 194)

This is not about listening to the tone or words of a human then, even though the text will undoubtedly be written in human language, but it is instead about attuning to the sounds of the non-human world: a cicada or a mosquito perhaps. For Gervais, then, to read and understand a text means being open to the sounds of a creature that is not us, to listen to it in whatever way it is trying to communicate with us. We have to learn – or, at least, acclimatize to – its language and behaviours and enter into a communion with it, without imposing our own will upon it. We have to let it be its own unusual self and hope that somewhere along the way we will fall into step with it, sync up with its behaviours and rhythms; understand it by being sensitive to it, receptive to its language. As Forrest Gander says, '[t]he great capacity of language is to bring us into proximity with one another' (2017: 114). By leaning in and listening to the language of the insect-text, then, it becomes less alien, less 'Other'; we grow closer to it and in the process begin to understand what it is trying to say to us.

There is, however, the possibility of misinterpretation, as Ursula K. Le Guin explores in her speculative story 'The author of the acacia seeds and other extracts from the *Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics*'. In this story, there is uncertainty about human interpretations of insect-texts – here, these are 'real' rather than metaphorical texts, as in the touch-gland exudations left by an ant on degerminated acacia seeds. In one instance, the seeds can be read to mean either 'Eat the eggs! Up with the Queen!' (Le Guin, 2015: 266) or 'Eat the eggs! Down with the Queen!' (267) – two very different meanings. As the fictional author of the journal article points out: 'The messages are fragmentary, and the translation approximate and highly interpretative' (265), which means that 'there is no way to decide whether the passage was intended to be an autobiography or a manifesto' (266). Indeed, the author goes on to postulate that any confusion about the meaning of the exudations is because of an 'ethnocentric interpretation of the word

“up” (267) – or, perhaps, an anthropomorphic interpretation<sup>4</sup> – whereby ‘up’ is considered a positive direction for most humans whereas it isn’t for ants as, for them, it can mean what lies beyond the relative safety of the anthill: ‘exile; death’ (267). This idea leads the author to claim the message left by the lone ant is not positive but is instead ‘the ultimate blasphemy conceivable to an ant’ (267) – a call for the ant Queen to die.

Gervais acknowledges the problems with communication and interpretation between what can be seen as different ‘species’ – the human reader and the insect-text – and that this is caused by their distance and difference to each other. However, he says that by engaging closely with the insect-text, the human reader *is* able to interpret and find meaning from it: ‘There is no equality between the reader and the text; there is only a distance that reading tries to reduce’ (Gervais, 2006: 194). By listening to the text, then, by reading and attuning to it, engaging with it on *its* own terms rather than ours, the gap lessens and the possibility of connection as well as understanding becomes feasible. The gap between the species begins to close.

But what about the writer instead of the reader? What of the person who *produces* such texts, especially a text that is more obviously creature-like, or insect-like, in its form and content? A dragonfly text, perhaps. How does the relationship between human and insect-text differ when thinking about the writer who creates that ‘fundamental otherness’ from their own self, instead of someone who is just the receiver and reader of it – when there should, in theory, be no distance that needs to be negotiated or reduced between them?

Zayneb Allak is someone who thinks about how creative work can be seen as non-human, as Other, and what her role as writer of such works is. She posits that, for her,

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<sup>4</sup> My exploration of anthropomorphism with regard to creating an insect voice is explored later, in the ‘Emergence’ section.



writing has ‘strange, uncanny origins’ (Allak, 2017: 8) and that, when it arrives, it is not an insect but an arachnid in the way it both materialises and behaves:

poems appear on the page like spiders – sudden, silent,  
looking like something quite different until one sees  
them up close – they hide in corners, double up, shift  
shape, align left then right, expand to the margins,  
contract, disappear. (Allak, 2018: 110)

For Allak, poems are spider-like: they are alive but quiet – appearing unexpectedly and behaving fluidly in the way they move about on the page. They are a force to be reckoned with and cannot be contained. They have agency and will not behave; they have power. But as writer of them, initiator, there is no distance that needs to be shortened or navigated between her and the spider-like texts she creates. This is because the poems are not separate from her but instead they *are* her and emerge from inside her own body: ‘Poetry is a spider body within my body, wriggling, jiggling, tickling’ (Allak, 2018: 110). They are alive and uncanny, yes, but they are a part of who she is; it is somewhat like being possessed.<sup>5</sup>

Daisy Johnson appears to agree, referring to fiction in somewhat similar, although more violent, terms – as something alive and unruly that emerges from within. After writing ‘Starver’, the first story in her collection *Fen*, Johnson found that the other pieces did not come so easily: ‘Not all of the stories came as simply, without fuss, as that first one. Most of them *wrestled out*; fought, were changed’ (Foyles, n.d.; my emphasis).

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<sup>5</sup> For William Faulkner, novel writing is like possession because the ‘artist is a creature driven by *demons*. He don’t [sic] know why they choose him and he’s usually too busy to wonder why’ (Stein, 1956; my emphasis).

They were inside her; they had to battle their way out to make it onto the page. Fighting in order that they might be seen. There is a physicality to the process that Johnson describes here which speaks of struggle and difficulty. It is a fractious act of metabolization where ideas and language are processed, transformed, through the body and mind of the writer so they can be used, made manifest (see 'Beginning' in this section for my own thoughts on ingesting and transformation).

For Allak, then, there is a symbiosis here, with the poet and the poem connected at a deep level, dependent on each other. They are human, non-human. They are human-spider hybrids.

But what of novel-sized texts which behave differently to poems, and which generally take longer to grow and evolve? Instead of a spider, can some other type of creature be used as a metaphor to describe the relationship between writer and text, to show how novels appear and behave? An insect – or, more precisely, a dragonfly?

My aim with this research is to use the dragonfly in a deeply embedded way, to inform both the narrative and form of my novel, aware as I progress of Le Guin's influential essay 'The carrier bag theory of fiction', which calls for a new kind of story rather than the 'Hero' story, the 'killer story' (Le Guin, 1996: 152); a story which I want to find as urgently as Le Guin does, where 'I seek the nature, subject, words of the other story, the untold one, the life story' (152) – not where 'the proper shape of the narrative is that of the arrow or spear' (152) but where 'the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel' (152–153) might be something more natural; for her 'a sack, a bag' (153), for me, a dragonfly. It feels right, too, that such a metaphor be extended to include both writer and writing process also, such that I think of myself and the text I create in these terms: as dragonfly-like or, in particular, as nymph-like in the early months of working on the novel.

*Writer as nymph.*

*Text as nymph.*

### ***Considering the ecocritical***

In thinking this way, I am alert to the ecological aspects of what I am doing. I am attuned to the ecocritical which looks for ‘interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature’ (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996: xix) such that I want the natural world of my novel to be more than just a setting against which human dramas play out. I want it to be that ‘[t]he ecological elements of stories do not exist simply in the background but are deeply integral to the story, even if used as symbols or metaphor’ (dragonfly.eco, 2021). And to also challenge the idea that only the hero and the human drama matter in the story world and that anything else – the natural world, the non-human – are just ‘props, ground, plot space, or prey. They don’t matter; their job is to be in the way, to be overcome, to be the road, the conduit, but not the traveler, not the begetter’ (Haraway, 2016: 118). As ecocriticism ‘negotiates between the human and the nonhuman’ (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996: xix) I also want to ensure that, as a work of ecofiction, my novel provides a space for the non-human, as well as the human. I want to give voice to the human but also to the dragonfly, such that they have some kind of agency in what I produce. I want them to have a say in a novel that bears their name and which relies so deeply on them for its shape, its stories. I want them to be empowered.

### **Egg**

When I first have the idea for this novel, it is an egg, embryonic: there is a boy, a woman and dragonflies and the knowledge that the boy has been recently bereaved through the loss of his mother. There is little else though, apart from the notion that the

boy is estranged from his father; that the father is drinking. There are possible flight-paths the story could take, but they burst out in the sky above me in different directions. The egg of the idea will have to grow and hatch into something bigger, something more novel-sized and substantial, and my instincts about the idea tell me it will – but that it will take time for this to happen.

In *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Peter Barry adopts an ecocritical perspective to discuss the ecological development of a poem. He explains how, in 1915, Thomas Hardy wrote ‘In time of “the breaking of nations”’ which features the figure of a ploughman working a field as a symbol of survival and continuation as a reaction against the destructiveness and catastrophic nature of the First World War. In truth, Barry says, the poem was only ‘*written down*’ (2017: 271; emphasis in original) and not conceived in 1915 though, as Hardy had actually seen the ploughman who is at the heart of the poem many years earlier in 1870. He says, ‘the seed of an idea was planted in the poet’s mind, an image grew and matured over time, and was eventually re-cycled to meet a need which arose many years later’ (Barry, 2017: 272); Barry concluding that ‘the gestation of the poem itself mirrors the patient processes of growth and cultivation which are depicted in it’ (2017: 272). Through an ecocritical lens, then, the ecological can not only be seen in the content of the poem itself – a ploughman in the field – but it is also there in how the poem comes into being: as something organic and natural, that grows and matures from the initial seed of the idea after a certain amount of time.

Fiction writers have referred to their work or their process in similar ecological or environmental terms. Johnson, for example, talks about writing fast and ‘*plough[ing]* out the first draft’ (Five Books, n.d.; my emphasis) and that, for her, ‘[t]here are always short stories *composting* at the back of my mind’ (The Booker Prizes, 2018; my emphasis). For Le Guin, language is bird-like in that ‘Words are the wings both intellect and

imagination fly on' (Popova, n.d.). Similarly, in Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize lecture, she refers to language as a bird that can be nurtured and cared for or killed depending on whose hands it is in: 'a dead language is not only one no longer spoken or written,' she says, 'it is unyielding language content to admire its own paralysis. Like statist language, censored and censoring' (Morrison, 1993).

It intrigues me that the development of a piece of creative work and how we consider it, not just the artefact itself, can be seen and described in such ecological terms. Is this the case with my own novel? Can I think about in this way also? I turn the idea over inside me and the ecological – even entomological – nature of the creative idea as well as its development over time is clear to me as light refracted through a raindrop.

It is 2014 when I see the dragonfly that is the spark for my novel and yet, like Hardy, I do not use the idea straight away. In fact it is many years later before I begin work on it – mainly because in that year I am still working on a previous novel – *The Dark Sky, Falling* about a meteorite hunter who gets caught up in a mystery (Ashworth, 2015). Then, when that novel fails to find a publisher, I am unable to write at all until the pain of rejection subsides. It takes a year or two for me to even think about writing something new but eventually the urge arrives, that desire to write and think on the page. For a time, though, the egg of my dragonfly idea can be said to have entered diapause, that 'state of suspended development that... typically constitutes an *anticipatory* response to unfavourable environmental conditions' (Corbet and Brooks, 2008: 98; emphasis in original), in similar fashion to how a dragonfly egg might. In this instance, the 'environmental conditions' are not right because I am still busy on another idea and then I am suffering a bookish kind of bereavement because of rejection. More than this though, the environment inside me is not right because it does not yet know anything about dragonflies so that the egg of the idea can be nourished and nurtured and

encouraged to grow. I have to, therefore, increase my knowledge about them – improve my internal feeding ground by filling it with facts and information so that the original idea can feed and grow, and I can write about dragonflies in a way that interests me: scientifically, symbolically. I therefore leave the idea to overwinter for a number of years, until my internal conditions are more favourable to its development. I open myself up to possibility and wait for the feeding ground to fill; an organic process which will involve gestation as well as metabolization of thoughts and ideas towards the creative act(ion).

## **Hatching**

To cultivate an internal environment that will allow the egg of the idea to hatch, become nymph and then grow, I carry out research into dragonflies in order to learn more about them. I read books such as *Dragonflies* (Corbet and Brooks, 2008), *The Dragonfly Diaries* (Mackenzie Dodds, 2014) and *Dragonflight* (Taylor, 2013), as well as a range of journal and newspaper articles. From these I learn about the dragonfly's 'ultra-multicolour', near 360-degree eyesight (Brahic, 2015), their impressive ability to detect 'small moving targets' against busy backgrounds (Dunbier et al., 2012) and the structure of their wings and how they are able to move each of them independently in order to catch prey (Highfield, 2008; Jongerius and Lentink, 2010). I also watch videos which explore and give demonstrations of dragonfly behaviour, for example their impressive track record as predators, so that they have a 97% chance of catching prey mid-flight (Gage, 2018) and their superior vision, which enables them to see 'faster' than us: 200 images per second in contrast to 60 per second for humans (BBC Earth, 2015). I also regularly consult field guides such as the *Field Guide to the Dragonflies and Damselflies of Great Britain and Ireland* (Brooks and Cham, 2014) as well as visiting the British Dragonfly Society

(BDS) website<sup>6</sup> for help when writing about the different appearances and behaviours of dragonfly species.

In order to build on what I learn, I attend a number of dragonfly events too, such as a Dragonfly and Damselfly Identification Workshop at Rixton Claypits Nature Reserve, Warrington, and go out on field trips and walks including a Dragonfly Walk at Mere Sands Wood, Rufford. I also look for odonata<sup>7</sup> myself when out walking, in order to try and improve my identification skills. As my knowledge increases I am able to recognise brown hawkers, broad-bodied chasers, black-tailed skimmers and emperors, as well as many more. I begin to be able to differentiate the more similar looking ones from each other too – the azure damselflies and the common blues, for example, such that I can look at segment 2 near the wings, to see where the azure has a ‘U’ shaped mark or the common blue has a black mushroom. I attend meetings of the BDS and the Royal Entomological Society, and also join the BDS; all of which help me to increase my knowledge of this fascinating insect. I have gone from someone who was not even aware that dragonflies spent most of their life underwater as nymphs to someone who knows much more about the science of the insect. All this from one single encounter.

I have the urge to do all this because I am the kind of writer who likes to incorporate science into my work because I feel it adds depth and richness to my writing, as well as resonance and layers of meaning. An example of how I use such scientific detail in my work can be seen in my short story ‘The rings of Saturn’ (in Ashworth, 2011), about a retired astronomer and his wife who are interviewed by the local newspaper for their golden wedding anniversary. In this story, a reporter arrives at the couple’s house and begins to ask them questions about their life together in order to be able to write the article. As the reporter interviews them, it becomes clear that something is not right

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<sup>6</sup> See <https://british-dragonflies.org.uk> [accessed 11 July 2021].

<sup>7</sup> The name given to the order of insects which includes dragonflies and damselflies.

with the man though and that he is unwell and suffering from some kind of dementia – particularly cruel considering the man was an eminent astrophysicist who once discovered a gap in the rings of Saturn but who is now struggling to function or remember anything much from his life at all. In the story, I use the idea of spaces in the gas giant’s icy rings as a metaphor for the man’s difficulties – the gaps in the rings reflecting the gaps in the man’s own memory. Scientific detail about the planet and its rings helps me to do this and to create a sense of depth in the story, with the metaphor of the gaps emerging naturally during the process of writing without anything having to be forced or imposed upon the narrative.

I sense a similar depth in the dragonfly, which means that I will learn more about them in order to be able to exploit their symbolic potential in a similar way – although over the course of a novel this time instead of a short story. The challenges of doing this will be immense – especially with regard to including scientific detail in such a way that the research is incorporated in as natural and seamless a way as possible; it is a challenge I relish undertaking though.

### ***Symbolism and metaphor***

In thinking about my interest in symbolism,<sup>8</sup> I look up a definition in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* and find that it says symbols are ‘a kind of figurative language in which what is shown (normally referring to something material) means, by virtue of some sort of resemblance, suggestion, or association, something *more* or something else’ (Greene et al., 2012: 1393). This means that, for me, dragonflies will never just be dragonflies in the novel. They will be ‘something *more* or something else’,

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<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, the ‘word symbol goes back to the Greek noun *symbolon* (sign, token) [which suggests] things that are split in two and need to be rejoined to obtain their full value’ (Greene et al., 2012: 3747) – reminiscent of symbiosis, of hybridity.



something which will hopefully create layers of meaning such that the novel can be experienced purely as a story on one level, but at a deeper, more symbolic, perhaps subconscious, level also.

May Berenbaum says that '[p]erhaps the most frequent use of insect imagery is for metaphorical or figurative purposes' but, she argues, this 'works only so long as people understand the connection', which, she says, they do because 'the majority of potential readers, willingly or not, share their lives with a diversity of insects' (Berenbaum, 2006: 4), and as such are familiar with them even though they may not realise it. Because of this, I feel the dragonfly will be effective as a symbol in the novel, especially as most people know what adult dragonflies look like at least; and have even perhaps had an experience with them at some point in their life.

For a number of people around the world, dragonflies are wrongly believed to sting or bite, and even to sew up the lips and eyes of naughty children (Mitchell and Lasswell, 2005: 20). In Japan the insects have traditionally been seen in a more positive light and were often depicted in haiku or art (Kiauta, 1986: 94) and could even be found on the armour of samurai warriors who believed they would bring them victory in battle (Samurai World, 2017). They even have associations with death and the devil (Lucas, 2002: 13) and are believed by Buddhists in Japan to be the winged mounts for spirits to return home on 15 August, a day of religious significance in the country (Mitchell and Lasswade, 2005: 33).

However, any symbolism will not be forced upon my story, which is an 'outside-in' way of working; imposing my will upon the text. Rather, it will be used in a more 'inside-out' way, whereby it emerges from within the story itself, more naturally – the same as it did in 'The rings of Saturn', for example, as well as in some of my other writing.

Saul Bellow explains my own feelings about symbols well. After being asked about whether symbolism was placed in his own writing consciously or subconsciously, he said: ‘A “symbol” grows in its own way, out of the facts’ (S. F. Butler, 2011). For Bellow, a symbol ‘grows’, emerges naturally ‘in its own way’ without being forced. It is something that occurs effortlessly as a result of ‘the facts’ contained within his own work, as if the writer is a conduit for the symbol, rather than a mechanic who has to forcefully shoehorn it in. There is an ecological aspect to his view of symbols which is clear to see here – and this is yet another example where writing, and the writing process, are explained using the language of the natural world, in green, ecological, terms.

My own approach is to do as Bellow says – let the symbolic nature of the dragonfly emerge naturally, through inspiration rather than perspiration, in the narrative. I am also aware, however, that I am deliberate and conscious about *wanting* to do it. It is a desire of mine at the outset, but a desire that I do not want to overly manage or control in order to ensure it happens. Ray Bradbury argues that consciously using symbols ‘would be a self-conscious exercise and self-consciousness is defeating to any creative act. Better to let the subconscious do the work for you, and get out of the way’ (S. F. Butler, 2011). For him, there should be no attempt to use symbols consciously in writing at all because ‘[t]he best symbolism is always unsuspected and natural’ (S. F. Butler, 2011). I feel, however, that the symbolic potential of the dragonfly is there without me forcing the issue – I intuited this potential when I first saw the insect and had the idea for the novel all those years ago: intuition often being part of the process for a writer and, also, often an undervalued part of it. As George Saunders says, ‘[t]he biggest thing I’ve learned about writing is that we tend to underestimate and marginalize the irrational, intuitive aspects of it’ (Nugent, 2019).

My aim in using the dragonfly symbolically is that this will hopefully connect with the reader at a level that goes beyond the words they read. Following my own *encounter* with the dragonfly years earlier, my desire in using them as both a real and symbolic presence in the novel is that a reader may *encounter* them in a similar way, such that they are revelatory for them. As Greene et al. state with regard to symbolism as a movement across Europe, first in France and then later Russia, its aim was to be ‘a theory of discovery, whereby maximum receptivity (contemplation of the natural world) leads directly to a visionary moment’ (2012: 3747); an idea which speaks to my own feelings. I was inspired and affected by the dragonfly that I saw and my hope, which I of course cannot ultimately control, is that any readers who engage with the novel will have a similar kind of revelatory experience. Having the dragonfly operate on multiple levels is a way in which this, I feel, becomes a possibility.

### ***Beginning***

It is daunting to begin a novel that wants to incorporate the dragonfly so deeply into it, not least because of knowing so very little about them but also because I do not know much about the natural world more generally. I did not spend much time in nature as a youngster or as a young woman, preferring instead to stay indoors and read, write or watch films. Indeed, it is only as I have grown older – getting into my forties – that I have wanted to get out into nature more, feel the sun on my face, the wind against my skin. Despite being a little more familiar with the outdoors now, I at first feel ill-equipped to write a novel that features the natural world so strongly. Why did the dragonfly choose me to write about them? Why did they not choose another writer who already knows about the natural world much more than I do? I do not, on the whole, know the names of trees or flowers. I do not know the names of different types of

grasses or plants. I do not know about birds and creatures and their life-cycles, the timings of making nests or having babies. But then, I remind myself, sometimes, we are called to certain ideas regardless, as I mention in the ‘Encountering’ section in the ‘Introduction’ where I discuss the nature of the artistic summons and the influence this has on our research interests.

The writer Jon McGregor is reassuring with regard to the early doubts I have. I read his novel *Reservoir 13* (McGregor, 2018), an impressive work of ecofiction that is as much the story of the natural world in its Peak District setting as it is the story of a missing girl, and wonder how he has done it. In an interview with George Saunders he discusses his approach:

I’m someone who *likes* nature... but I don’t know anything about what I’m seeing. So this was all reading and research, googling, and lots of fact-checking afterward with people who do know this stuff properly. And to be honest, it’s a lot of smoke and mirrors as well. There’s not a ton of detail about any one thing.  
(McGregor quoted in Saunders, 2017)

There is an honesty in McGregor’s words here which reminds me that on the whole writers are not experts about particular topics – instead they use their research skills in order to acquire the necessary knowledge in order to give the illusion of expertise about a certain subject, as McGregor does; as I have done myself previously. After reading *Reservoir 13* I was convinced McGregor had a wealth of knowledge about the natural world, and that was why he’d been able to use it in his novel in the way he did. But the interview told me otherwise. He had convinced me of this through illusion, through the

use of ‘smoke and mirrors’, through bringing all his skills as a writer to bear in order to create a believable and authentic natural world setting through the use of small but specific details, such as those about springtails and lambs, blackbirds and foxes.

I remember I can also do this, that I have previously written short stories – and even a novel (Ashworth, 2011; Ashworth, 2015) – that feature aspects of astronomy, despite not being a scientist or an expert in the subject. I learned through reading books, watching programmes, through visiting the Natural History Museum in London in order to speak to a meteorite expert and see their impressive collection of space rocks. I even interviewed the UK’s only professional meteorite hunter, Rob Elliott. All of this helped me to write and is an approach that aligns with recommendations in the *Creative writing research benchmark statement* which says that research may include ‘experiential learning, whereby creative writers put themselves in particular situations or undergo experiences in order to generate writing’ (NAWE, 2018: 5), or that ‘source-based methods’ may be used, including documentary evidence, interviews and artefacts in order to produce creative work, ‘seen broadly to correspond to field work and archival research in other subjects’ (NAWE, 2018: 6). I know I do not, then, have to be a dragonfly expert in order to write about them – I just have to learn what I can and use ‘smoke and mirrors’ if necessary.

### ***Water***

The world of the novel is watery when I begin work on it. There are lots of things about it that are fluid, unclear, not fixed in my mind. There are elements I have no strong, overriding opinion about, aspects I am unsure of even as I get to them in the story. I have the idea for the main narrative – the boy’s loss of his mother, his estrangement from his father who has begun drinking as a way to cope with bereavement, the boy’s

friendship with Clara and their trips to look for dragonflies: the insect providing the main vehicle for Henry's coming to terms with his loss.

However, there are many elements I am unsure of. I want a secondary narrative from Clara's point of view and a third from the dragonflies' but what will these be and how will I approach them? I want the novel to reflect the dragonfly in form as well as content but how? What aspect of the dragonfly's entomology can help me do this? As Denise Levertov says, '[f]orm is never more than a *revelation* of content' (2009; emphasis in original), such that for me this means I want both aspects of the novel to be 'in a state of dynamic interaction' (Levertov, 2009), with each illuminating the other, in an organic way.

Further, I know Henry's mum has died of an aggressive type of cancer but which one, and how will I learn about its progression and any treatments in order to refer to it in a believable way? How old is Henry? I want him to be young but not too young such as to risk the novel being too childlike, but what age is that? I am uncertain and concerned at how fluid many aspects of the novel are. But, as Alison MacLeod says, '[a]ll good writers have to rest easy with uncertainty, or with what Milan Kundera calls "*the wisdom of uncertainty*"' (MacLeod, 2014: 91). And so I accept that these elements of the novel are watery, yes, but I reassure myself that I am not drowning in it all, not yet. However, neither am I waving.

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The fluid and watery nature of novels has been explored by other writers previously, in their own essays and poetics. Again, it reassures me that it is a natural part of the process. David Swann likens the act of writing a novel to crossing a river:

The way I see it now, a novel is a brawling river that the writer must somehow cross. If you develop a rough idea

of the place on the other shore where you'll eventually  
scramble ashore, you gain confidence and motivation,  
even if the end-point ultimately shifts. (Swann, 2014:  
143)

For Swann, the journey is watery and uncertain, but having an idea about the ending – the ‘shore’ where you want to end up as a writer – gives him confidence in his ability to traverse the river of his story. However, it is not just about where you begin to cross and where you end up. He adds that ‘stepping stones in mid-river’ are also needed, as in ‘crucial scenes which give the crossing a sense of purpose’ (Swann, 2014: 143); having such points along the way, he says, will help to ensure that the journey cross-river can be completed – stony breadcrumbs that the writer can see up ahead and then move towards, following their trail. In a further development of his watery metaphor, Swann adds that a river itself is like a narrative with its ‘waterfalls and rapids, its pools and meanders. Always changing, always the same... like a well-made story, its end implicit in its birth, the spring destined to become a delta’ (Swann, 2014: 144). I love the idea of thinking about novels in such ecological terms as this. Considering them in this way is exciting, fresh and challenges what Jane Alison refers to as the ‘masculo-sexual’ (Alison, 2019: 6) nature of the dramatic arc which ‘swells and tautens until climax, then collapses’ (Alison, 2019: 6) – a structure which, she argues, young writers are often encouraged to emulate, despite the fact this idea of the arc dates back to Aristotle who lived more than 2,000 years ago. As Alison says, ‘how curious that a single shape has governed our stories for years’ (Alison, 2019: 8). How curious indeed, how unambitious of us. How is it we have struggled to think much beyond this idea in the hundreds of years that we have been writing? Why have we limited ourselves in this way?

In her book *Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative*, Alison argues there are many other interesting patterns in nature – waves, wavelets, spirals, fractals, and so on – and that writers should draw on these instead. As she says, ‘[t]he arc makes sense for tragedy, but fiction can be wildly *other*... Wouldn’t it make sense for the shape of our experience to be organic?’ (Alison, 2019: 15; emphasis in original).<sup>9</sup>

While my own novel is watery in the first draft, in the sense it is fluid, not fixed, it is to the ‘wildly *other*’ of the dragonfly – and not a river – that I turn when considering how it comes into being, how it functions, how I write it, and also the shape I want it to be. It is my conception that the initial idea for the novel is the egg and that once it hatches – as I begin to read and research the dragonfly, as I begin to write – that the novel in its early stages is nymph-like: it is small but growing by the day, it feeds on words and ideas, sheds dead narrative-skins that no longer fit it – and, occasionally, it is at risk of death.

In yet another ecological description of the writing process, Margaret Atwood says that ‘writerly methods... resemble the ways of the jackdaw: we steal the shiny bits, and build them into the structures of our own disorderly nests’ (Atwood, 2015: xviii); an idea which is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot’s famous quote that ‘[i]mmature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different’ (Eliot, 1997: 105–106). Atwood sees the writer, then, as a jackdaw, a thief. Stealing from the world in order to make a nest of fiction out of what has been taken from it. But does Atwood mean the taking of ideas and images or anything else that might influence the texture or trajectory of a story here? Or might

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<sup>9</sup> Although the idea of the narrative or dramatic arc can be said to have some relevance with regard to most novels – such as in the creation and resolution of tension – I am trying to question the over-use of this, and instead suggest that other narrative shapes may still contain tension and resolution but have more interesting structures and plots. For example, a story which mimics the shape of an explosion, with narratives bursting out from a central point, may have multiple points of tension as well as moments of overlap or collision – very different to one which follows the traditional idea of an arc.



she also be referring to the *form* a story might take, the literal ‘structure’ of the fictional nest, such that any resulting work becomes collagic in form, constructed of multiple stolen fragments? Who might really be the author of such works? And *what* is the writer here? Creator or compiler? Coordinator? Puzzle solver? Jane Smiley, who often refers to writing as a puzzle, says knitting, which she also loves, is similar to novel writing, in that it ‘is kind of a puzzle. You start out, and... you have an idea, but you don’t know exactly how you’re going to put it all together. And as you continue, there’s some point at which you’ve done the research, and you’ve put a bunch of stuff on paper. And then at some point, it gels’ (Smiley quoted in Simon, 2020). Not *writer*, then, but builder and solver of puzzles? Puzzles comprising innumerable stolen pieces? Or perhaps a pattern-maker, to continue with Smiley’s knitting analogy. An idea for future research, perhaps.

But I question Atwood and the notion of taking and using. For me, writers never just steal from the world and then use what they take. There is taking, yes, in order to feed our writing and this is reminiscent, to me, of the dragonfly nymph who ambushes any tasty looking prey that comes into its vicinity. As odonatologists Corbet and Brooks say, ‘[t]heir default mode is to ambush prey as it swims or crawls within range of the labium [an extendible organ under the mouth] which is then extended, extremely rapidly, to grasp the prey and draw it back to the mouth’ (Corbet and Brooks, 2008: 116). And, yes, I can see this grabbing of prey with my own novel – in particular with regard to Swann’s analogy of the river and knowing roughly what the ending is. For example, as I write the first draft, I don’t know what the ending of mine might be or contain – unusual for me as I often have an inkling of what a possible ending might look like. But after reading Marianne Taylor’s book *Dragonflight: In Search of Britain’s Dragonflies and Damselflies* as part of my research, her account of a year spent looking for odonata, the ‘rough idea’ of my ending is there in her beginning.

In the Introduction, Taylor explains how her cat jumped and attacked a dragonfly – a hawk – leaving the insect ‘[b]ashed and bitten, its wings were crumpled and its dented body had lost its glittering colour’ (Taylor, 2013: 6). This moment provides Taylor with her own opportunity for an encounter with a dragonfly, where she is able to look at one closely for the first time (as with Mackenzie Dodds, this is another example of an encounter with a dragonfly that leads to an inspiring journey – this time resulting in Taylor’s year-long search and book). This is not the end for the battered dragonfly though. Instead, in Taylor’s account, ‘something strange’ (2013: 7) happens:

Before our eyes the damaged wings were slowly  
straightening and stiffening, and the squashed part of its  
abdomen was puffing up to its correct dimensions.  
Colour was returning to its body and eyes, and it was  
standing straighter... The restored wings began to  
vibrate, blurring away the exquisite tracery of vein-work,  
and then the dragon lifted off straight up like a jump jet.  
It flew powerfully away, hardly a trace of a wobble to  
betray its recent brush with death. (Taylor, 2013: 7)

This idea of repair, of the dragonfly continuing after a ‘brush with death’ has an immediate impact on me and I know then that this is where I want my novel to end; the metaphor of continuation after loss strong and clear in the description Taylor gives. I remember again what Bellow said – a symbol that grows ‘out of the facts’ (S. F. Butler, 2011) – and I am convinced about using this. After reading Taylor’s account, it is clear to me what I am now writing towards in the novel: an incident where a dragonfly is

attacked but survives; the metaphor for hope after loss strong and clear. The idea vibrates and buzzes inside me, like the whirr of wingbeats in my chest.

The symbiotic relationship between writer and novel is obvious here, in this gathering of ideas to feed the work. I see and ambush this idea – as well as others – in order to help the novel grow; to encourage it to continue through its life-cycle towards some kind of end. However, to return to my earlier point, it is not about taking and using such ideas as they are though – moving them from one place and putting them straight into another. Instead, it is about *transformation*. For instance, I ingest the material, consider it, turn it over, process it and then feed it to the novel whereby it is transmuted (another dragonfly analogy?) into something else, a reaching towards art. The idea that is then actualised in the creative work is a kind of hybrid – composed of elements of the external stimulus and also my own thoughts which are the result of my life experience to that point. What emerges in the novel is the literary offspring of both of us. Creativity *is* metamorphosis, with the idea *becoming* something more, or something other than it was.<sup>10</sup> It becomes what I think of as art.

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What do I mean by ‘art’ though? What is it to me? How does it function? Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky defines art as the removal of ‘the automatism of perception’ (Shklovsky, 1917: 8), which is achieved, he argues, using defamiliarization, for example, through the use of poetic language or by describing an object or event as if seen for the first time – which enables us to see objects with fresh eyes rather than with dulled senses and through the lens of ‘habitualization’. Without this ‘[t]he object is in front of us and we know about it, but we do not see it’ (Shklovsky, 1917: 2). We are almost blind to it. It is not art. It is just something we barely perceive because we have

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<sup>10</sup> For further discussion on the idea of ‘becoming’, see the section ‘Taking flight’ in ‘Adult: A Conclusion’.

seen it so many times before. We register it on some level, but that is all. As Shklovsky says, art makes the familiar more strange to us again, and as such ‘exists so that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony’ (1917: 2). Art encourages us to see. It helps us to wipe the clouds from our eyes so that the world becomes new to us again. And this is what I am reaching for in my novel: for a freshening of the senses through the use of strong similes and metaphors, by using the dragonfly both symbolically and scientifically so that we can learn about it and learn about ourselves too.

In my artistic recycling of Taylor’s experience, then, written using the lyrical language<sup>11</sup> that comes naturally to me, it is a dog that will jump for the dragonfly, rather than a cat, and the dragonfly will not survive unscathed, unlike Taylor’s hawk. It will be an outcome that will satisfy my aim to have the insect represent the idea of continuing on with life despite the wounds that are carried. The idea being that repair or recovery following loss does not mean a return to a previous, unaffected state, but instead means accepting and living in a new form; damaged perhaps but surviving. The symbolic potential of the dragonfly coming in here, by making it into art. Or a reaching for it at least – through language, through symbolism, through the totem of the dragonfly.

### *Shedding*

In thinking of the novel as a dragonfly nymph, I see it too in how it must also shed dead narrative skins that do not serve it in order to grow and become its final shape; skins

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<sup>11</sup> Lyrical, to me, means being attentive to the rhythm of my writing and how it flows as I read it, and to the use of alliteration, assonance or other literary devices.

that are constraining or restricting and which, if left, would suffocate it or even kill it outright.

In the early months, I attempt to write a secondary narrative from the point of view of Clara, the woman who Henry becomes friends with and who takes him looking for dragonflies. The narrative is written when Clara is elderly and in a home for the elderly, struggling with her memory. She remembers a boy but is in a state of confusion about who he is, even about who she is:

She is here again, now. Emerging from the too bright dreams she keeps having: oranges and reds like the colours on a faulty television, the skin on people's faces and hands the same shade as strong tea; and everything moving, too much, too fast – the images swiping past so that she can never fully grasp onto anything or understand what's what. So much so that it makes her seasick to try and make sense of the dreams – nauseous from the tips of her old, grey hair down to her toes. Does she still have grey hair? She is not sure for a moment; it seems so long since she's looked into a mirror that it's possible she might have another colour of hair entirely by now. Lavender, like some of the other people here perhaps. Or gold like the child. Yes, gold. That would be good.

I write around 10,000 words but the narrative has no life to it – there is a deadness in it, a feeling of stagnancy; something that is severely detrimental to the novel, especially

one that is so interested in ecology and entomology, the aliveness of the world it wants to represent. The narrative is about an elderly woman lying in bed and trying to remember the boy and what happened with him but there is no forward momentum, no energy. There is nothing at stake, no tension – it is dead. As American short story writer Raymond Carver said: ‘There has to be tension, a sense that something is imminent, that certain things are in relentless motion, or else, most often, there simply won’t be a story’ (Carver, 1985: 50).<sup>12</sup>

Carver’s words ring inside me; they force me to act. Even though this narrative skin is useful, in that it helps me come to a decision about writing the narrative when Clara is younger instead and setting it just before she comes to Henry’s town to search for dragonflies, it is clear it has to be excised. Despite liking some of the writing in it, the narrative is not alive, not working and so it has to go. It is less a case of ‘kill your darlings’, the advice often given to writers struggling with words which may be good but that do not contribute to the story, and more a case of shedding a dead skin that is now suffocating and draining the life out of the novel. The narrative has to be cast off so that the fresh cuticle of a new skin can emerge from beneath it: alive and vibrant, bright with possibility. It has taken months to write this section but that cannot stop me; I have to be ruthless about it in order to help ensure the survival and good growth of my novel.

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<sup>12</sup> Using dragonfly eyesight to see into the future of my novel, this idea of ‘relentless motion [of tension]’ is expressed in numerous ways. Aside from the disappearance/death of Henry’s mum Laura before the novel starts, there are a trio of other disappearances across the narratives, which create uncertainty and tension throughout: Arthur White is ill with dementia and disappears from his home and is lost in the woods; Henry’s dad disappears after drinking heavily; and Henry himself disappears and becomes lost in the woods. These repetitions and echoes across the narrative strands, arguably, heighten tension – the anxieties about one disappearance latching onto and deepening the anxieties caused by subsequent disappearances. In all instances, it is unclear whether the characters will reappear and survive, especially with regard to Arthur who is already ill, and Michael Salmon, who Henry is concerned will leave him like his mother has – Laura’s death creating a potential foreshadowing of another death also. All of this helps the novel to align with Carver’s notion of ‘relentless motion’, with the tension-baton passed from one character to another across the narratives.

‘The woman with the dragonfly tattoo’ – which is the name I often give this storyline, because of the elderly Clara having such a tattoo on her – is cut out and placed in a separate file, perhaps never to be opened again. The dead skin is removed, placed out of sight. And I ready myself for the growing of something else, a new narrative skin.

### *Skins*

This idea of shedding skins has resonated with other writers too – although not, as far as I am aware, with regard to dragonflies. Jenn Ashworth, on Twitter, posted the following after completing her fifth novel, *Ghosted: A Love Story*:

Someone I know said ‘after you finish a book, you just “shed” it – like a snake getting rid of an old skin.’ And it feels PRECISELY like that. It isn’t shed yet, but I can feel the old cells peeling away a little.<sup>13</sup> (Emphasis in original)

Here, the idea of shedding is not connected to the writing process itself but occurs afterwards, when the book is written and on the road to publication – when it is released from within and sent out into the world. For Ashworth this shedding is a single and final act of detachment, although it does not appear to happen quickly or immediately and instead occurs gradually and slowly, cell by cell.

This idea of the writer separating and splitting from the text they have created echoes what I speculate about in the opening to this ‘Nymph’ section when I say, ‘I will shed it

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<sup>13</sup> See tweet by @jennashworth, 11 March 2021, 8.48am.

and it will shed me for one final time, and we will be free of each other' (see opening paragraph). As the narrator in Paul Williams' novel *Cockcraco: A Novel in Ten Cockroaches* observes, with regard to central character Timothy Turner, a lecturer, albeit with regard to academic publishing rather than fiction: 'When you publish something, it is not yours anymore: it becomes something else. It is no longer a part of your soul, if it ever was' (Williams, 2013: 57).

For me, though, this idea of being free of each other is not fully accurate. It is more complicated than that. Ultimately, there may be a physical and mental separation where I am no longer thinking about or writing the novel, and the novel is out in the world (or not), no longer relying on me to feed and make it grow. We will always be linked though; always retain the traces of each other. To further Ashworth's analogy, cells of the discarded skin of the novel will continue to stick to the writer and so will not be shaken off completely – that would necessitate a going back in time, a return to a pre-novel, purer state when you had not had the idea, not written it, not become changed by the writing of it. Equally, the cells of the writer will always be present in the novel – in the language, the ideas, in the traces of autobiographical details (see discussion of my novel's autobiographical elements in 'Appearance' in the 'Emerging' section).

Ultimately, this is because everything is connected. And everything that is connected is connected *always*. Cells consist of atoms and molecules that have already had many lives before. The water in my body, for example, did not start with me; it is the story of all of us. Some of its molecules were present in the water drunk at the Last Supper (Haitch, n.d.). Even the molecules in our bodies contain around a million atoms that once existed in Jesus's own body; I breathe in now and take in a molecule of his last breath (Reville, 1999). Everything is connected. Forever. The water in the ink of this thesis may contain water that has been inside me and everyone else who has ever been. We are everyone. We are the traces of each other.



So, even though the symbiotic link may appear to have been broken, if you put both writer and text under the metaphorical microscope, look closely enough, each will be present in the other, waving up towards the lens.

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Gaylene Perry engages with the idea of skins also during research for her novel *Water's Edge*, when she visits the Isle of Skye, where the book is set, to help flesh out the setting and characters. She has written 40,000 words of a first draft but needs to visit the island that has only existed in her imagination up to that point. It is when she finds what will be the home of her historical character Marian on Skye's Trotternish Peninsula that she makes this observation:

The line between the sea and the sky was indiscernible. I felt uncomfortably close to both of my main characters, Serena and Marian at that moment. I wanted to shake something off as though another skin had draped over me. (Perry, 2010: 38)

Perry's perceptions of the landscape – the melding of sea and sky – reflect her own merging with the characters she is writing: they are near to her, 'uncomfortably close'. And this does not appear to be a pleasurable experience but is instead something which she wants to 'shake... off' like a skin. The skin she imagines, though, is not one that is part of the writer and that needs to be sloughed off during the writing process or after a book is finished, implying a growth of sorts, a moving beyond an old self to a newer one. Instead, this skin is external to her. It is something that is placed over her, seemingly without her consent – the skin of her characters, perhaps. The way she

describes this suggests feelings of entrapment or claustrophobia, of being buried beneath something unwanted.

It is interesting that the section of Perry's novel that emerges as a result of this observation reflects this idea of merging, with her main character Serena connecting with her ancestor Marian as she writes in a journal: 'A shadow seeps over her... Serena's ancestor walks into her mind... Serena lets Marian walk around her, touch her long hair... [Marian's] voice sounds until Serena wears it, *absorbs* it...' (Perry, 2010: 38; my emphasis). This idea of closeness and then assimilation, of one character being absorbed by another, appears to mirror Perry's own experience with her characters during her research, although she seems to want to resist this. Such merging, if it happens, implies, to me at least, a potential loss of what we might think of as our unadulterated self, whatever that may be; a conjoining with something external, such that individuals are no longer singular or discrete but are instead something Other, something hybrid. This commingling of one with another suggests a wateriness in the boundaries of our characters, but also in our own boundaries as writers too, with the writer and the work *becoming* one in what can be considered a symbiotic dance of creation – the emergent text and the writer (changed as a result of the writing) the two artefacts which are eventually produced.<sup>14</sup>

For Kim Lasky, in her exploration of poetics, the word 'symbiotic' is used not to discuss the merging of writer and text but instead the strange relationship between creative writing practice and theory, as well as process and outcome, which sometimes 'involve failed attempts and the mysteriously instinctual in their happening dynamics' (Lasky, 2012: 16). She goes on to give examples of poetics from the likes of Henry

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<sup>14</sup> The novelist *becomes* Other, then, unlike the poet who is already Other, as with Allak's idea of poetry being a spider-body that lives inside her own (Allak, 2018: 110). See 'Adult: A Conclusion' for more on 'becoming'.

James, John Fowles and Doris Lessing in order to show ‘where writers articulate the strange symbiotic process involved in writing, where critical thinking feeds intimately into creative practice’ (Lasky, 2012: 19) – with the poetics the offspring of this symbiotic relationship. It is clear the idea of symbiosis has a connection with writing that runs all the way from writer and creative output to writer and character, to creative work and our reflections on it. Nothing operates on its own. As Jane Bennett says, ‘[w]hile the smallest or simplest body or bit may indeed express a vital impetus... an actant never really acts alone. Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces’ (Bennett, 2009: 21).

Kishwar Desai further considers the idea of merging and absorption during the research phase of a project, saying that writers become ‘like a sponge, *absorbing* the information’ until they gain ‘an almost visceral understanding of the subject’ (Desai, 2014: 67; my emphasis). Here, the writer is penetrable, does not have a clear boundary; knowledge enters them like water and becomes a part of them until they are transformed into something else: a new kind of writer who can create the work that is calling them; somewhat like a computer game character who collects skills or weapons which will enable them to complete their quest. Desai, however, is talking about research for a work of non-fiction here rather than fiction, where she is considering real people – or subjects, as she terms them – rather than fictional ones. The process of summoning up people in order to commit them to the page though, I would argue, is similar; it is still about imagining and creation; the rendering of a believable form of humanity through the use of language.<sup>15</sup>

And her observations about this echo those of Perry when Desai says, ‘the research brings you ever closer and closer to the subjects until they become an extension of your

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<sup>15</sup> As Arundhati Roy says, pointing out similarities in the two genres: ‘Fiction and non-fiction are only different techniques of story telling’ (Roy, 2002).

own persona' (2014: 67). For Desai, the sense of closeness and proximity to people she is trying to envision and make real in her writing – such that they are an extension of her – is clear; and this is something which I have also experienced, particularly with regard to bereavement, and which I discuss in the next two sections. As she writes, '[y]ou begin to eat, dream, even sleep, with them... by your side' (Desai, 2014: 67). In contrast to Perry, however, Desai does not feel discomfort about this process of amalgamation with her imagined subjects. Instead, it makes the writing easier, as if the book 'wrote itself' (Desai, 2014: 67); a problematic idea which relegates the writer's role to that of only channel, which leads to a discounting of the many challenges and difficulties often faced by writers when bringing a creative *work* into being.<sup>16</sup> The process is also referred to in positive and even spiritual – less physical, 'skin-like' – terms: it is 'fantastical', 'serendipity', 'reassuring', 'mystical' and a 'magical and interesting experience' (Desai, 2014: 67); something that Desai appears to welcome. Indeed, this experience leads to an insight for her: 'I realized that, as an author, *if I understood the main elements, I could construct the story*' (Desai, 2014: 67; emphasis in original). This closeness to the subjects, the work itself, allows for a level of understanding which can then be transmitted through the vehicle of the book. Without this, it feels that, for her at least, it's not that there would be a failure on some level, perhaps at the level of characterisation, but that it may not even be possible to construct a story at all.

### ***Morticelle (Little Death)***<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> It is called creative *work* for a reason. As Ernest Hemingway said, 'writing is something that you can never do as well as it can be done. It is a perpetual challenge and it is more difficult than anything else that I have ever done' (Hemingway, 2003: 419).

<sup>17</sup> One of more than 300 folk names given to dragonflies in Italy (see Lucas, 2002: 8).

The dragonfly is everywhere – is me, the novel itself, the way I think about the writing process. There is another way that it is present also; a way I am avoiding writing about. I resist writing the word even now, two years later. Why? Is it because writing it makes it real in the way that when I wrote stories as a newspaper reporter it made what happened to other people real also? Proof that something had taken place? *See what happened to such-and-such. Read this. Look. Have you seen the story about the man, the woman, the girl, the boy?* The woman that was killed crossing the road. The teenager who died in a car crash. The promising student who almost succumbed to meningitis. Writing a story changed the whisperings and conversations on the street – the *heard* – into something real and printed and true – the *seen*. Once something was written in ink, it could not be unwritten. It was material, visible. It was evidence of a life lived and something that happened to the person living that life. It became documented. If it was written in the newspaper, it was real. It could not be wiped away. It was something people could point to as the truth, or a version of it at least.

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Just a few months into the PhD, my dad... my dad... left us. That is the way I say it when I refer to what happened: he left us. He was here and then he was gone. At home then not. He. Left. Us.

I cannot bring myself to use the ‘d’ word for him. It is there inside me but I cannot make it come up into my throat and out through my mouth.<sup>18</sup> I cannot even write it now. I can use ‘left us’ or ‘passed away’, but never the ‘d’ word. Am I in denial, as psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross with her theory of the five stages of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance – might have said? (Kübler-Ross, 2014). Am I

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<sup>18</sup> This makes me think of the death’s head hawkmoth pupae placed in victims’ throats in the film *The Silence of the Lambs*; my brain making the connection between not being able to say the ‘d’ word, a moth associated with death (Marshall, 2015), and its use in a film; the image of the moth blocking a throat reminiscent of my inability to use a certain word.

deluding myself about what has happened to him, about the cruel and rare type of liver cancer that made him jaundiced and took him from us just a few weeks after his diagnosis? Have I not yet reached a place of acceptance about it? No. None of that feels right to me. I know he's not here. I know he has left us. I know that I will only see his face on photographs and in dreams now; same as Henry in the novel does. All of this is clear to me. It's just that I cannot bring myself to use the 'd' word to say why he's not here anymore. It is either that the word does not sit right on him, like an ill-fitting cap on his head, or it's that it is too final a word for one who was, who was... so full of life and humour, who lit up a room when he entered it, who was a character that people rarely forgot after they encountered him (even if they might have wished they could), who had the filthiest sense of humour, who often saw a line and did not just cross it but went way beyond, who had nicknames for everyone including for my mum and her best friend who resemble each other (The Kray Twins), who always gave money to buskers, who once handed the last fifty pence in his pocket to a friend down on his luck, who hummed badly and out of tune if he was listening to music on headphones, who would playfully grab children – me and my brother included, when we were little – and rub his stubbled chin across their cheek to raw it and give them what he called 'a shave', who loved driving along an open road in a motorhome when he had one, or towing the caravan, with music blasting out on the radio while he and my mum would sing along to whatever was playing... No. No. The 'd' word is not the one for my dad. It isn't. It can't be. 'I am writing about my father in the past tense,' writes Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie after losing her own father, 'and I cannot believe I am writing about my father in the past tense' (Adichie, 2020).

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Kübler-Ross's theory of the five stages of grief does not resonate with me when I think about losing my dad and how I felt afterwards: the shock, the tears, the brain fog such

that I could not think properly or deeply, could not write (a second diapause?) or work on the teaching certificate I was also doing alongside the PhD; which makes sense, especially when considering Bessel van der Kolk's ideas on trauma and the impact this can have on the brain, in particular the shutting down of Broca's area, which helps with understanding and articulation: '[W]hen people really become very upset, that whole capacity to put things into words in an articulate way disappears' (quoted in Tippett, 2019). There was the physical sensation of loss somewhere in my chest too, as well as an intense feeling of fear that I was suddenly and irreversibly becoming uprooted from the world,<sup>19</sup> with only my mum and brother to keep me grounded here. Judith Butler sums the feeling up perfectly. 'Let's face it,' she says. 'We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something' (J. Butler, 2006: 23). And this is because we are entangled in the lives of others; we are part of them as they are part of us – meaning that when they leave us, we don't know *what* exactly has left us, we just know that something significant has gone. And that it will never return to us. As Butler says:

[Sigmund] Freud reminded us that when we lose someone, we do not always know what it is *in* that person that has been lost. So when one loses, one is also faced with something enigmatic: something is hiding in the loss, something is lost within the recesses of loss. If mourning involves knowing what one has lost (and melancholia originally meant, to a certain extent, not knowing), then mourning would be maintained by its

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<sup>19</sup> In another ecological reference, Adichie refers to her father's death as 'news [which] is like a vicious *uprooting*. I am yanked away from the world I have known since childhood' (Adichie, 2020; my emphasis).

enigmatic dimension, by the experience of not knowing  
incited by losing what we cannot fully fathom. (2006:  
21–22)

As Butler says, grief shows us ‘the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control’ (2006: 23). As such, we might try to manage our grief, to ensure it fits neatly into our lives so that we can carry on as before, with only a small interruption to accommodate the loss. But bereavement shows us this is not possible. That we cannot control or manage it. That we cannot be as we were before. We lose someone, but we also lose *parts* of ourself in the process. As Butler says, ‘[o]ne does not always stay intact’ (2006: 23). We may try to, she says, and even be able to for a while but eventually ‘one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of touch, by the memory of the feel’ (Butler, 2006: 24).

Because of the symbiotic nature of our relationships with those we love and lose, we do not know where we hold them within us, where the many pockets that contain them live, where their blood runs alongside our own. As such, we cannot control our grief because we are so enmeshed with them that it is impossible for us to know all the places within us that they have touched. We cannot salve so many sites of our hurting.

Kübler-Ross’s theory does not capture how I feel now, my own particular ongoing grief. I am not angry or depressed. I am not in denial or wanting to bargain for my dad’s return. I do not need to find acceptance. These labels feel too clinical to me – too clean and perfect. They are cerebral, verbally literate. They are imposed from the outside, using a part of the brain that the bereaved are unable to access. They tell me nothing of



my loss, of how I might consider or navigate it. Instead, there is something earthy about my grief, something more personal to me, more ecological – especially considering how fluid it is, how able to transform. Sometimes, loss makes me feel watery, physically and emotionally, sometimes more grounded in the here now, appreciative of what I had, sometimes airborne especially after recalling a happy memory or when hearing my dad’s voice inside me making a one-liner in response to something that has happened.<sup>20</sup>

Where is the denial here? Where is the anger? And so I have to find my own way to think about it, to talk about it. I have to find my own language of grief, a new theory of loss.

To be fair to Kübler-Ross, her interviews with terminally ill patients, which led to the five stages of grief model as outlined in her famous 1969 book *On Death and Dying*, were just the starting point; a first attempt by anyone to give a voice to the dying. And even though the idea of there being five stages captured the public imagination, as Lucy Burns argues: ‘There were never just five stages, though. While each of these gets a chapter heading, a graphic in the book describes as many as 10 or 13 stages, including shock, preparatory grief – and hope’ (Burns, 2020). The model had flexibility then, a looseness in it; it was not a theory that was rigid, or which was expected to immediately map onto and explain all types of grief for all people. In fact, as Kübler-Ross’s son Ken Ross says: ‘[The five stages are] not some sort of recipe or a ladder for conquering grief. If people wanted to use different theories or different models, she didn’t care. She just wanted to begin the conversation’ (Burns, 2020). And this is what I am attempting to do in the novel; exploring the creation of my own model for grief; making an entomological framework for the loss that Henry and I both feel.

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<sup>20</sup> See how watery our boundaries are – not just as writers but as humans? My dad is no longer external to me – if, indeed, he ever was – but is within me, *is* me now.

What is interesting is that in the more recent grief literature there have been calls for professionals to not impose their own theoretical, distanced language on those who are grieving, but to instead become more attuned to the kinds of language that grieving people use – thereby empowering the bereaved in their own process of understanding and recovery. Inge B. Corless et al. (2014) argue that ‘[g]rief is universal’ but that ‘[i]ts oral and nonverbal expression varies across cultures as well as individuals’ (2014: 132), meaning there is not just one language of grief, however, but many – as many languages as there are people perhaps; or maybe more, if, as they say, ‘[a] different language may be used by the same person on different occasions at different times of his/her life’ (2014: 141). A multitude of languages, then.

In their Languages of Grief Model, Corless et al. posit that the languages ‘used by the bereaved differ from the language utilized by professionals, creating dissonance between the two’ (2014: 132–133) – an observation which they attempt to counter through the creation of a model which de-centres the professional but centres the bereaved, with its four modes of expression (verbal, non-verbal, physical responses and physical activities) and four types of language that bereaved people might use (narrative, symbolism, metaphor and analysis); all of which have the purpose of ‘understanding grief from the perspective of the bereaved’ such that ‘grief [becomes] more understandable for the griever and those bearing witness’ (Corless et al., 2014: 142).

In my own novel, I want to not just decentre the professional but decentre the human, by creating a model for grief which privileges the non-human – through the use of the dragonfly life-cycle. As discussed in the next section, humans are not the only creatures who experience loss, who feel grief, and so using a non-human life-cycle for grief attempts to show this; that bereavement is as much a non-human experience as a human one. As Donna Haraway says, ‘[l]ike the crows and with the crows, living and

dead “we are at stake in each other’s company” (Haraway, 2016: 39; citing Thom van Dooren).

*‘We are each other’s stories’<sup>21</sup>*

The dragonfly is everywhere as I write this novel. It is as if I can now only see the world through dragonfly eyes. Their colours stain everything. Therefore, it is to the insect that I turn as I consider my own grief – as well as the grief of my character Henry. It is the dragonfly that gives me a framework for our loss, as well as for the structure of the novel. And this is apt. Other creatures experience loss as I do; mourning is not a purely human experience. Corvids have been shown to experience grief (Haraway, 2016: 38) as have wolves, elephants and chimpanzees, who sometimes ‘mourn individual deaths’ (Oerlemans, 2018: 122–123). Using the dragonfly in this way, therefore, highlights how entangled we are in our life experiences as inhabitants of Earth. As Haraway says, ‘[g]rief is a path to understanding entangled shared living and dying; human beings must grieve *with*, because we are in and of this fabric of undoing’ (Haraway, 2016: 39; emphasis in original).

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This is what emerges as I think about all of this...

When I begin, I am not bereaved but Henry is. When I begin, I am only imagining grief; it is Henry’s and Henry’s alone. When I begin, I am only inventing what Henry’s mother has become ill and died from, not experiencing it in my own life. But as the novel progresses and my dad leaves us, Henry and I move closer together; we become entangled, begin to occupy the same space. I become him and he becomes me. My

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<sup>21</sup> Text taken from opening paragraph of the ‘Nymph’ section.

feelings of loss and uprootedness become his feelings; my searching for evidence of my dad's continued existence becomes his searching for his mum; my dad's jaundice, itching and coldness, his inability to sleep properly become Henry's mum's symptoms.

Henry and I join. We merge. We become each other's stories.

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It is symbolism and metaphor that strike me most about Corless et al.'s *Languages of Grief Model*: the idea that the partner of a fisherman might 'scatter his ashes at sea, a physical activity with symbolic meaning' (2014: 137), or that someone may create a jigsaw puzzle of a butterfly because 'her dead friend... danced "like a butterfly"', which reflects the idea that 'although the pieces of the puzzle can be reconstructed, the scars of separation remain' (2014: 137). These kinds of ideas are what speak to me most.

For me, it is the dragonfly's life-cycle that becomes the metaphor for mine and Henry's movement through grief, and which provides a structure for the novel – with sections that move from 'Nymph' to 'Emergence' to 'Adult'; the 'Nymph' section being the longest because this stage is the longest for dragonflies (ranging from weeks to months to years depending on which species you look at). In the novel, I envision that these sections are less like distinct parts, which might indicate gaps in time or movement between characters or some other kind of very clear and obvious change, but instead are more like the deviations and movements through the music of the dragonfly's life: fluid and natural; one section flowing into the next part of the cycle.

For me, this evolution from nymph to adult becomes a metaphor for the life-cycle of grief – from the newborn rawness of it, where there is so much sensitivity to everything it is like having shed a skin;<sup>22</sup> to emergence from that early rawness and into an in-between state where you are neither the person you were nor the one you will become,

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<sup>22</sup> For Adichie, grief is not about removing skins but about acquiring them: 'Grief is forcing new skins on me, scraping scales from my eyes' (Adichie, 2020).

where grief is neither new nor established but is to be negotiated; to adult, where grief is the new reality, but where there are moments of flight when recollecting happier, uplifting memories of the person lost, while also carrying the more painful memories of loss under your wings.

In the novel, each section reflects Henry's grief state, with moments occurring in each one which symbolise this idea: Henry falls into grief/falls into water in the 'Nymph' section; he begins to emerge from destructive grief/emerge from being lost in the woods in the 'Emergence' section; he takes flight from the rawness of grief and learns to live with loss/is lifted into the air by both his dad and Clara in the 'Adult' section.

It is important to recognise of course that I am talking about a *life-cycle* here – with recognisable movement through it but with hints of continuation as well; a suggestion that there may not just be one cycle but perhaps many, an infinity of them. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* states with regard to 'life cycle': '*Biology*. The sequence of stages through which an individual organism passes from origin as a zygote to death, *or through which the members of a species pass from the production of gametes by one generation to that by the next*'.<sup>23</sup> Life-cycles of grief, then – with the possibility that the raw early grief is not only experienced once but will recur, same as with the feelings of emergence from it, or the sensations of flight despite the pain being carried. Grief continues. Each stage does not just happen once but is ongoing. It evolves but does not end. This is a metaphor that works for me, for Henry; but I acknowledge that it is perhaps a metaphor that works *only* for us and nobody else. This is our shared experience.

In their explanation of metaphor as part of The Languages of Grief Model, Corless et al. (2014) state, '[a] metaphor is figurative language depicting one phenomenon in

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<sup>23</sup> My emphasis. See <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/108098?redirectedFrom=life-cycle#eid> [accessed 19 April 2021].

terms of another' and that '[m]etaphors provide a means to both cognitively and emotionally express grief, and are "basic to creative thought"' (2014: 137; citing Czechmeister). But the metaphor used can change. As they suggest, the language of grief used by a person may change depending on the occasion or time in their life when bereavement occurs (Corless et al., 2014: 141). For me, the dragonfly life-cycle explains *this* grief at *this* moment in time; but if it had happened at another time, with another piece of writing, the metaphor might have been different. If I had been writing about astronomy, for example, as I was with my short story collection *Somewhere Else, or Even Here* (Ashworth, 2011) or with my unpublished first novel *The Dark Sky, Falling* (Ashworth, 2015), then I may have likened grief to a black hole where the gravity is so strong that not even light can escape it; or perhaps where the heaviness of loss is like the density of a neutron star where 'a teaspoon of neutron star material would weigh around a billion tonnes' (Swinburne University of Technology, n.d.). No, the dragonfly is the prism through which the language of my grief emerges. More than that: the dragonfly is my totem. It is the way I try to understand loss, both in me and in my characters. It is the way I consider it, navigate my way through it. It is the scaffold from which everything emerges.

## Emergence

*Dragonflies undergo incomplete metamorphosis; unlike other winged insects, such as butterflies, dragonflies do not have a pupal stage and transition straight from a larva to an adult. This transition, the final larval moult, takes place out of water' (British Dragonfly Society, n.d.)*

We emerge. From water to light. Murk to clarity. From the density of liquid to the lightness of air. This is how it goes for me and the novel, and for the dragonfly itself. The nymph work is done so that now it is time for the next stage – up and away from the wateriness that is present at the start of things and towards another state. An in-between state. Where the novel is older, has grown; where it has become more than it was but where it is not yet its final shape. Not yet that which it *will* be. The suggestion of that is here though, promising as the hint of rainbow on a day of rain and sun. The novel has emerged from the wateriness of newness, of uncertainty. And it reaches now for more solid ground.

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When nymphs emerge from the water after months or years of feeding and growing, climbing up a support or a stem to make their way out, they still look like nymphs. Some of them are spider-like with their fat, little bodies; others less so. Their abdomens reminiscent of armadillos or woodlice, with those armour-like ridges which give them the appearance of being suited up for battle – appropriate considering how fierce and warrior-like they are; with those small eyes with what look like pseudopupils on them; those wing sheaths tucked into their backs.

I witness part of an emergence once while out looking for dragonflies, but only from a distance and while using someone else's binoculars. It is intriguing, awe-inspiring; hard to look away from; it is a scene that makes it into my novel. I just want to be able to get

nearer instead of being at the edge of a pond while the dragonfly emerges on some vegetation in the middle of it. The insect is half-way out of her old skin when I first notice her. She has still not pulled her abdomen out. Unfortunately, though, I am unable to watch all of it. It is lunchtime and I am on a workshop – a dragonfly and damselfly identification course in Warrington. Everyone there is watching the spectacle, but time is limited, and this was not planned for, and so soon we have to move on to do other things. It is tempting to stay and watch but it could be hours yet. Reluctantly, we lower our binoculars, and go back into the hut. I look for the emerging dragonfly again when we come out later, but the light has changed and I am unable to see anything.

A creature emerging from the body of another should be the stuff of nightmares, of horror films, shouldn't it? John Hurt with the creature bursting out of his chest in *Alien*, perhaps? The alien emerging from the throat of sleeping Russian cosmonaut Konstantin in the film *Sputnik*. And yet it isn't. To me, this is not horror but nature at its most strange and beautiful. It is the natural world in all its non-human glory.

Although dragonflies still look like nymphs at this point in their life-cycle, they are no longer that really. Their life as a nymph has finished. Level completed – tick. In fact what they are now is adults in nymphs' clothing (Corbet and Brooks, 2008: 148) – their adult selves with their large compound eyes and impressive wings are there but hidden beneath the husk of their final nymph bodies. They have shed skins any number of times – perhaps up to fifteen times by this point (Mitchell and Lasswell, 2005: 60); and here they are again, ready for the last go.

This is the time of emergence. The change time. When nymphs make their final moult – shedding that last constraining skin – to become the adults they have been growing towards for months or years (or weeks, depending on species). They cling to the stem for some time before the skin splits and the adults begin to emerge. The thorax, head, legs and wings coming out before a rest and the final push as the whole



abdomen appears. Once out, the wings and abdomen expand then, begin to harden – toughening up for the dangers and stresses of flight, of adult life. The whole process takes from an hour to a few hours (British Dragonfly Society, n.d.) with the skin they have cast off – the exuvia – continuing to cling to the stem or the vegetation as the dragonfly holds on above the husk. The new adult dragonfly moves away from their old self after breaking fully free, getting ready to make a first tentative flight. No longer a nymph but a teneral,<sup>24</sup> the name given to those fresh born into adulthood. A teneral with pale, young colours that are not yet those of more mature dragonflies – whose hues are different, deeper, richer; not yet sexually mature; and with two pairs of wings now which are reminiscent of shards of stained glass but with the shine of a soap bubble, inlaid with dark, tiny veins. Transformation achieved. Almost ready now for the world of adults.

### *Second draft*

I think of the word ‘emergence’ as I work on the second draft of the novel, wonder what it means as I turn it over inside me. A quick look now at its synonyms on here tells me some of them: appearance, rise, advent, arrival, development, occurrence, beginning, materialisation, surfacing... I linger on the word. Yes, surfacing. That is what it felt like to finish the first draft and then begin to turn my attention to the next. Like a breaking through the surface skin of water. Like a coming up into air. Like the exact point at which you move from one medium and into another. The no-man’s land between one state and the next.

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<sup>24</sup> Latin for ‘tender’. See the etymology of ‘teneral’ at the *Oxford English Dictionary* at <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/199121?redirectedFrom=teneral#eid> [accessed 26 April 2021].

I was submerged during the first draft – finding my way without being able to see properly, caught in mental weeds at times, pulled by the sometimes differing currents of story and formal ambition. But now that I am finished with that draft, and have what is beginning to look like a novel, I can breathe easier, can see my way clearer. I have more of an idea of what it is I am trying to do, of where it is I am heading.

That is not to say all difficulties and challenges are at an end – they aren't. It is just that I am more in control of the material, of the world I am creating. It is being able to see from a different viewpoint: down into the water instead of from up and out of it. My perception has shifted. Yes, I have emerged, and so too has the novel.

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Thinking about 'emergence' and how this relates to my writing leads me to think about what *emerges* too: what appears, what arises, what develops. I think of my dad and how, without intending to, he is appearing in the novel. I think of dragonflies and how they are influencing my narratives; how their voice is also demanding to be heard. I consider all of these as examples of emergence, of what surfaces as I progress. In a way, they are all related to voice, examples and expressions of it. They are voices that are insistent on being heard, with the result being that through my writing I appear to be giving voice to the voiceless – to those who have never had one, to those who no longer have one: my dad, the dragonfly. I will discuss these ideas in the following sub-sections, using some of the synonyms for 'emergence' as guides for each part.

### **Appearance**

In grief studies, the idea of the bereaved needing to relinquish their bonds to the deceased has been in existence for over a hundred years, and was first theorised in Sigmund Freud's essay on *Mourning and melancholia*, published in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this he writes:

Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition – it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them. This opposition can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis. (Freud, 1917: 244)

Samuel Ho and Ide Chan say this theory about the damaging nature of grief led to the belief that the bereaved should therefore ‘relinquish the tie to the deceased (de-catharsis) by withdrawing the emotional energy tied to the person and reinvesting it in new relationships’ (2018: 131). Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s five stages of grief as well as other recent theories appear to align with this idea, with the aim being that those grieving should accept the loss and find a way to move on, let go. However, as Dennis Klass outlines, in the past twenty-five years or so, the continuing bonds model of grief has emerged and taken root. This model was founded on experience in clinical practice and the idea that ‘[b]ereaved people did not sever the bonds with significant people who had died as the accepted theory said they should. Rather, people continued the attachment, albeit in new circumstances’ (Klass, 2018: xiii). He argues that this is not evidence of ‘pathological grief’ as the earlier theory might have suggested, a reluctance to let go of the lost, but is instead evidence of them ‘maintaining bonds with the dead...

[which is not negative but] could play a positive part in the survivors' ongoing lives' (Klass, 2018: xiii).

What is interesting is that this idea of continuing bonds finds expression in the novel before I even know anything about it. It just *appears*. As I write about my characters' bereavement – mainly Henry's and his father Michael's – I find that the idea of an ongoing relationship with Laura (Henry's mother) after her death emerges naturally and draws the story forward. It is there in Henry's grief, when he believes that his mum is still around watching him but that she is hiding from him – in a soap bubble, for example, 'after he's remembered to run himself a bath' (see *Dragonfly*, page 29) – or when he searches for her down at the river at the start of the novel and falls in; his grief leading him into dangerous territory, such that it even threatens his life, as he wanders around, unchecked, in a bid to find her – all compounded by the fact he is struggling to remember what she looks like, meaning she is not only lost to him in a physical sense, but internally also. The idea of continuing bonds is there in all of this as well, for example when he sees a dragonfly in the kitchen and thinks it is her, and when the glowing paint on his marbles appears and he believes it is a message from her.

His father Michael grieves in a different way. He is consumed by loss and begins drinking as a way to block the pain of it, staying in bed because he is unable to function in this new reality that has foisted itself upon them. He is so caught up in his own feelings that he stops working, and even fails to take proper care of Henry, relying instead on neighbours to provide food for them. The only action he seems able to perform is that of ordering alcohol to be delivered to the house; an act of self-medication that ultimately results in him being taken to hospital. For Michael, it is only in his recovery from alcohol abuse, from the early devastation of grief, that we see evidence of continuing bonds. It is there most obviously in his feelings of inadequacy as a single parent as he summons his wife to help him: "Laura, help me be better for our

boy” (see *Dragonfly*, page 165); this idea reflecting Inge B. Corless et al.’s Languages of Grief Model, with regard to the idea of communication with those who have passed (an idea which aligns with the continuing bonds theory), which says, ‘the griever may ask the deceased to intercede on his/her behalf for divine intervention. The deceased becomes the intermediary... the expectation [being] that the dead will act in some way’ (Corless et al., 2014: 140). For Michael, he makes this request during the night – as Henry lies beside him in bed – and it is prayer-like in its tone and content. He believes Henry is asleep and calls on his wife to help him improve as a parent; an act which shows a belief in continuation after death, such that, for him, his wife still exists and can continue, in some way, to assist him.

This idea of the bereaved believing the dead are still around somewhere, playing a part in the lives of those who live on, appears naturally without my controlling or forcing the issue – and is perhaps a reflection of my own beliefs, my own feelings about my dad and where he is now. For me, the dead are ‘watching over the living, guiding the living, and communicating with the living’, which ‘[exemplifies] the reciprocity of a continued relationship, one that provides benefits and succor to the griever’ (Corless et al., 2014: 140).

As Henry and I have merged in grief, it is no surprise, then, that I behave as he does, and that he behaves like me. I call upon my dad regularly, for example. I ask him questions: ‘What do *you* think, Pops?’ Or ‘Is that right?’ Somebody says something to me and I turn inwards to hear what he thinks about what they’ve said – hearing his reply, often making a joke or being inappropriate. Sometimes I tell my mum what ‘he’ says and it makes her laugh. Once, when the front door opens and is banged closed in the exact way he would do it, I call out but nobody is there. ‘Is that you, Pops?’ but there is no reply. When a mirror falls from the living room wall during the night and smashes a ceramic ornament – an animal that relates to the names my parents had for

each other – me and my mum are both convinced it’s a message from him. ‘Aye, it’s your Dad,’ she says. ‘Letting us know he’s still around.’

There are more of these. These conversations, behaviours. It is the way our lives are now. This is who we are. This is not pathological, as Freud might have said. This is love. Purely and simply. He has left us and there is an acknowledgement of that. Of course, of course. But, also, he has not. And I believe it is possible to think both ways, despite the apparent contradictions of saying this. Schrödinger’s thought experiment on the nature of quantum mechanics, for example, said a cat in a closed box could be both alive AND dead at the same time (Castelvecchi, 2018) – until somebody opened the box to observe it; the wavefunction of potential collapsing to the single point of an outcome. My dad, therefore, is both here and not. Alive and gone. Perhaps this is why I have not looked, cannot look, into the box that contains his ashes – the wavefunction will collapse, the outcome be decided. It is better not to look at all, isn’t it? But no matter really. For us, he continues. He still exists.

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Gaylene Perry found herself writing her own lost father into her novel without intending to. The narrative of *Water’s Edge* just seemed to pull that way – a magnetic kind of tugging that she was not necessarily in control of: ‘I had not planned to put a father, and certainly not a drowned father, into the scheme of the novel,’ she writes, ‘but there he was’ (Perry, 2010: 41). A missing father – presumed drowned – appears in her narrative, but, as she says, ‘[t]he drowned father is my ghost, much more than he is Serena’s [her character’s]. I could not keep this missing father out of *Water’s Edge*’ (Perry, 2010: 40). Similarly, Jane Rogers found that her father affected the writing of her own novel *Mr Wroe’s Virgins* – the story of prophet John Wroe who seeks comfort from seven virgins after being instructed by God to do so. Not only did Rogers’ father help her find the idea for the story after she became annoyed by his comment that she

should ‘tackle “a bigger topic”’; it was no good just writing books about women and feminism’ (Rogers, 2021), but his loss also influenced the narrative: ‘[I]n the years it took me to research and write the book, life intruded to alter and colour it – most significantly in the sudden illness and death of my father. My loss became [my character] Hannah’s loss, and her grief gave me the key to her character’ (Rogers, 2021).

Something similar happens with my own novel: not just through the incorporation of personal feelings and experiences relating to the loss of my dad, but as in he himself surfaces on occasion without me expecting him to. This is not overt, not obvious and not in the way that somebody who knows him might read it and say, ‘oh yes, there he is’. But he is there. In one minor character in particular; in certain other ways too.

For instance, what I find is that as I write the speech and description of a character who briefly appears in my secondary narrative, it is my dad I am thinking of – even though the man is a wildlife enthusiast, a photographer and wearing waterproofs, neither of which I associate with my dad. Despite this, as I write him into life, it is him. “My wife says I can talk a glass eye to sleep”,’ he says at one point referring to his chattiness and how another character he had met ““Didn’t say much. Well, he probably didn’t get chance”” (see *Dragonfly*, page 81) – referencing my own dad’s talkativeness and desire to be sociable; the ‘glass eye’ comment something my mum often said about him, in mock exasperation, after striking up long conversations with neighbours or strangers. And the description of the man – ‘He smiles, his cheeks plump and pink’ (see *Dragonfly*, page 81) – is the way I see my dad, with his good cheekbones and a smile on his face. It is also him when I write about how the man shared one of his biscuits with another character, because my dad was always generous, often overly so, with friends, family, even strangers.

He is there in numerous other ways: when CB’s dad forgets where he has parked his car (see *Dragonfly*, page 109), just as my dad once did and I had to drive over to try and

find it for him; in the description of the back of Derek's neck being 'sun-stained and criss-crossed with wrinkles' (see *Dragonfly*, page 70). As mentioned earlier in this section, I cannot even look at my dad's ashes never mind scatter them – and yet here he is, sprinkled throughout the narrative so that he is visible, to me at least, everywhere.

He appears in other ways also, in more upsetting ways – mainly with regard to Henry's mum who has died. When I started writing, I knew she had become ill and died quite quickly afterwards; I just didn't know what the illness was, or how it had progressed. When my own dad became jaundiced and then was diagnosed with cholangiocarcinoma – liver bile duct cancer – before passing away just a few weeks later, I knew this little-known cancer was the disease that would take Henry's own mum from him. It had to be. There was nothing else on my mind.

Me. Henry. More merging. The two of us inseparable now. He ingests my grief as I ingest his and we grow, the novel grows; all of us changing, becoming more than the nymphs we were.

It is in Henry's memories that we find out what has happened to Laura, his mum, about the illness that has struck and then taken her out of her son's orbit, at a time before the novel begins. At one point, for example, he remembers her telling him to "Look for me, Henry... If you need me, just look for me and you'll find me, OK?" (see *Dragonfly*, page 56). And it is here that my own memories of my dad and how the jaundice affected him, caused by the tumour blocking his bile duct, become those of Henry:

She was on the settee, propped up on the big pillows  
that had been brought down from their bed, a blanket  
up to her belly. The fire always on full then because of  
how bone-cold she felt all the time... Her skin was more



yellow then – more than it had been when that colour first came just weeks before. Her eyes too – not the white and bright they had always been but as if she'd dipped a yellowed paintbrush into them. (See *Dragonfly*, page 56)

And even though the cancer is terminal for Laura, as it was for my dad, I give her the same experience of having a stent inserted into her bile duct, a procedure used to try and drain the yellow bilirubin out of the system – the aim of which is not to cure, but to prolong life... from weeks to months, or a year at most. A procedure that, sadly, did not work for her, as it didn't for my dad, both of them passing away just a few days after the operation.

[Henry didn't like] the way the yellow was staying instead of going – despite the operation to put something inside, which was supposed to help take it all away. The colour looked wrong against the blue of her tattoo, the gold of her wedding ring. It brought sleep when it shouldn't. Nibbled away at her appetite. Made her scratch at her skin until the blood came. Turned her pee to cola. By then she didn't even have the energy to suggest playing Henry's game... (see *Dragonfly*, page 57)

Because of the jaundice, Henry begins to associate the colour yellow with pain and death. When his dad, who has started to drink large amounts of alcohol to cope with his own feelings of loss, goes missing and is then found collapsed, the paramedics place a

yellow blanket over his legs – a yellow blanket that is ‘the same colour as the one the nurse put over his mum’s legs when the thing they put inside her to take the yellow from her skin didn’t work’ (see *Dragonfly*, page 88). This leaves Henry in a state of anxiety, which makes him feel ill:

The yellow is not the kind that makes him feel warm and full of light inside like that of butter or sun, but a yellow that makes his stomach wring itself out... [making] him want to tip forward and retch... He wants to reach for the blanket, grab at it and rip it away from his dad but he’s unable to make himself even touch it. (See *Dragonfly*, page 88)

Later, when out looking for dragonflies with Clara, she talks to him about the common clubtail she wants to find. The mention of yellow with regard to the dragonfly’s colouration reminding him of the yellow blanket, which now has painful associations with both parents. The way Clara then talks about her own father, as if bad news is coming, makes Henry worry what she might say, making the pain of his own loss resurface again.

Her words. Something in them. Something coming.  
Clouds darkening over him somewhere that might bring a hard, hurting rain. Stoning him sad. All of a sudden he wants Clara to stop, shut up. Wants her to be quiet, to put her books away, pick her backpack up and for them to carry on walking. He wants the words to go away.

*Yellow dragonfly, yellow blanket, red sundews*. Stop. (See  
*Dragonfly*, page 138–139)

Even though the novel is not autobiographical, it is clear that there are elements within it that can be considered as such: from references to my dad, to descriptions of his illness, to a small reference to my own panic disorder and how this makes me feel like wanting to vomit sometimes, just as it does with Henry when Clara talks about her father. There is clearly a blurring of the line – if indeed there is a line – between the real and the fictional here, as there perhaps is in all creative work, no matter how much we might argue our work is purely imaginative. It is apparent, to me at least, that the imagination does not operate from a void, but instead utilises our thoughts and experiences, our *lives*, in interesting and unexpected ways; in ways we cannot foresee. As Perry says, ‘I think what I learned most from the act of writing this novel, was about the instability of boundaries between the fictive and the autobiographical’ (2010: 37). And, indeed, this is what I am discovering with my own novel, especially with regard to grief and how this seeps into the writing without my intending it to. The novel is, in a way, a vehicle for my own bereavement, as well as a way to give my dad a voice now he no longer has one of his own. It is, in a small way, a memorial to him; a way for him to continue to exist, beyond my own and my family’s minds, as well as those many others who continue to contact us with reminiscences of him. It is my way to try and make sure he lives, a little at least, in the minds of anyone who might read it, no matter whether they knew him or not.

## **Arrival**

It is not just my dad's voice that emerges during the writing of the novel. Another thing arrives also: the voice of the dragonfly.

The first time I sense this voice – or voices – inside me is very early in the process, just as I begin the first draft. The dragonflies arrive and speak in first person plural – ‘We begin in water and so it is with you’ – giving me the impression of some kind of Greek chorus, which gives the sense that the dragonflies are a community, a whole, rather than just a particular individual. Following this enables me to write from an underwater nymph's point of view or a flying adult's, or to move between species. A line in A. S. Byatt's novella *Morpho Eugenia*, about Victorian naturalist William Adamson's investigations into the ant world, confirms this approach: ‘We may see their [ant] communities as the true individuals, of which the independent creatures, performing their functions, living and dying are no more than cells, endlessly replaced and renewed’ (Byatt, 1995: 114). Although Adamson is referring to ants here, which, unlike dragonflies, live in communities and are very different types of insect, this idea of the community as individual (behaving and speaking as one) resonates with me; and therefore I pursue it.

And although that is all the dragonflies say at first, I know instantly it is they that are speaking, and that the ‘you’ they refer to is not me, but my character Henry. The dragonflies want a voice in the novel. They want to be heard.

### ***Voice***

Toby Litt in *The Art of the Novel* says that new writers worry about finding a voice but argues that, ‘[m]ost writers don't find a voice... They find **Obstacles**’ (Litt, 2015: 107; emphasis in original), implying there are challenges to be faced and overcome when it comes to finding – or, rather, *creating* – a believable, authentic voice. This feels true to me, especially as the dragonflies do not give me any more words beyond those few they

utter in the early stages of writing the novel. How to continue with this voice, then? How to make it representative of a creature that is not human? And, more importantly, how to do this while still using human language, which I must do if I want them to be understood? Litt goes on to posit that, for him, voice is ‘not how writers *say* the world, that’s a relatively surface thing, it’s how they *see* the world. If you see the world differently, you will need to find different ways of expressing what you see’ (Litt, 2015: 107). For the dragonfly, then, it is important for me to consider how they *see* the world, not necessarily how they *say* it – which makes sense, especially as dragonflies do not vocalise in any way, and so their perception, rather than any vocal expression, is key.

In considering dragonfly perception, and how this might feed into such a voice, I contemplate Jakob von Uexküll’s notion of the ‘*umwelt*’, which can be defined as a creature’s unique sensory experience of the world, i.e. *their* world from *their* perspective, not ours. As von Uexküll says, by placing a bubble around a particular animal this ‘represents each animal’s environment and contains all the features accessible to the subject’ (von Uexküll, 2010: 43); the idea being that ‘[a] new world arises in each bubble’ (von Uexküll, 2010: 43). He uses the example of a tick to make his point, arguing that the tick’s *umwelt* consists of a limited number of elements: the smell of butyric acid which it senses from mammals that draw near to it, the temperature of the blood it consumes, and the awareness of hairiness when searching for a patch of bare skin it can drill down into. This means that the blind and deaf tick’s world is more narrowly-focused, very different to our own and any other creature’s, such that, ‘[t]he whole rich world surrounding the tick is constricted and transformed into an impoverished

structure that, most importantly of all, consists only of three features and three effect marks – the tick’s environment’ (von Uexküll, 2010: 51).<sup>25</sup>

In order to capture something of what it means to live as a dragonfly and experience the world through their perception, then, I must consider their own *umwelt*, attempting to look at the insect from a more-than-human point of view – as far as it is possible to do so.

Therefore, I revisit my research into the dragonfly, and their eyes in particular – their ‘ultra-multicolour’, near 360-degree eyesight (Brahic, 2015), their ability to detect ‘small moving targets’ against busy backgrounds (Dunbier et al., 2012), how they can see ‘faster’ than humans (BBC Earth, 2015). I am unable to find photographs or explanations about the specifics of what the world looks like for dragonflies though – the kinds of colours they see. The scientific research discusses the eye but there is no explanation about the particularities of their vision. This impedes me for a time as I am unsure what kinds of details to include, but I remind myself that it is the job of the writer to imagine the unknown. And, as Alison MacLeod says, this absence of concrete knowledge is not restricting but actually creates fictional potential: ‘It’s in these gaps – gaps of research, gaps of experience – that the voices and *the voice* of one’s novel can enter’ (MacLeod, 2014: 92; emphasis in original).

But how accurate and realistic can such an attempt at creating a non-human voice be? How successful if ultimately I am constrained by my own humanity?

In his famous essay ‘What is it like to be a bat?’, Thomas Nagel questions what he considers to be reductionist accounts of consciousness, arguing that any imaginings of other perspectives are limited because only our own specific (human) experiences can

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<sup>25</sup> Of course, the tick’s world is only ‘impoverished’ if we judge it from a human point of view. To the tick, it has all it needs to function and survive, such that any other inputs would be superfluous to its needs and therefore redundant.

feed into such contemplations. He uses the example of the bat to explore his ideas, positing that a bat uses sonar and echolocation which is not analogous to any human sense and, as such, is impossible to fully comprehend. Nagel says:

It will not help to try to imagine that one has webbing on one's arms... that one has very poor vision and perceives the surrounding world by a system of reflected high-frequency sound signals... it tells me only what it would be like for me to behave as a bat behaves. (Nagel, 1974: 439)

Instead, he says, he wants to know 'what it is like for a bat to be a bat' but concludes that having to use his imagination to do this means he is 'restricted to the resources of [his] own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task' (Nagel, 1974: 439). For Nagel, then, any attempt to consider a type of consciousness other than our own is flawed because of the need for *human* imagination to adopt 'the point of view of the experiential subject' (Nagel, 1974: 449).

Considering Nagel's point of view about the limitations of consciousness in imagining other perspectives, in particular the non-human, one of the issues in using the imagination to bring the dragonfly to the page is that of anthropomorphism – the projection of human qualities and behaviours onto what is not human; an issue which concerns me especially as I am giving the dragonfly a voice which reflects its own perspective as much as possible. However, as Claire Parkinson argues, 'anthropomorphism is inevitable within popular culture' (Parkinson, 2019: 39), mainly because any representations of the non-human are delivered through the mechanism of humans communicating with other humans, meaning that human language and human

frameworks *have* to be adopted in order for understanding to take place. Val Plumwood agrees, saying that ‘any representation of speech-content for a human audience will have to be interpretation in terms of human concepts and in that weak sense a background level of anthropomorphism is always likely to be present’ (cited in Parkinson, 2019: 25).

Even though anthropomorphism may be unavoidable, therefore, it is clear that there are a variety of anthropomorphisms, and that these seem to operate on a spectrum ranging from naïve or more anthropocentric anthropomorphism, which ‘attributes human feelings and thoughts to animals based on insufficient information or wishful thinking’ (de Waal, 1999: 260), to animalcentric anthropomorphism, which is from the animal’s perspective, and even anthropodenial, which Frans de Waal argues rejects the idea of any similarities between humans and non-humans at all. Therefore, even though anthropomorphism may be a factor in the creation of my own dragonflies, not least because they speak a form of English, I want to adopt a more animalcentric anthropomorphism which will attempt to capture, at least, *some* essence of the reality of the dragonfly.

I am drawn to Marc Bekoff’s idea of a ‘biocentric’ anthropomorphism, which is a type of animalcentric anthropomorphism which ‘can take the animal’s point of view, thereby allowing “other animals’ behaviour and emotions to be accessible to us”’ (Bekoff cited in Parkinson, 2019: 28); and so the human is not completely removed from the equation, because the dragonfly point of view is being explored in order to illuminate humans about their insect lives, but the non-human point of view *is* foregrounded as much as possible.

Dan Wylie argues that writers enable a connection to be made between both non-human and human worlds, because of the possibility of capturing *some* essence of the non-human perspective through the use of hints and suggestion, rather than exactness of representation. Speaking about poetry specifically, he says that the ‘power of poetry



lies in its ambiguity and openness, rather than in the impossible ideal of mimetic clarity, in taking “full advantage of the possibilities of language to bridge and embody both anthropocentric and biocentric meanings” (cited in Oerlemans, 2018: 12). And even though he believes it not possible for any such writing to fully move beyond the limits of human perception, he feels it is still possible to ‘negotiate the borderlands between interspecies subjectivity and exteriorized observation’ (cited in Oerlemans, 2018: 12).

Even though it may be impossible, then, to represent an animal point of view in the purest sense, without considering the human at all, it is the job of writers to negotiate this terrain through the use of research coupled with imagination; with imagination used to fill in the gaps that science has, so far, been unable to address.

As I begin to try and expand on the few words of a dragonfly voice I have though, I encounter difficulties with both the voice itself as well as what it says. Although I want the voice to be Other in some way, I am unsure what the language should be like – prose, poetry, prose–poetry? I am uncertain about what kinds of details to include, as well as how much to have the dragonfly narrative interact with the other ‘human’ narratives in the novel. It takes a long time before the voice begins to emerge properly, echoing what MacLeod says about the difficulties of creating voice: ‘On a good day, voices might arrive unexpectedly, but mostly, the discovery of the voice or life of one’s novel demands resilience’ (MacLeod, 2014: 95). And indeed it does.

My teaching practice helps in some ways when it comes to finding the voice, especially when I teach George Saunders’ short story *Fox 8* (Saunders, 2018) to first-year undergraduates. It is from reading this and seeing how Saunders has been playful with the language in order to capture the voice of a fox that I find a way towards my own dragonfly voice. Saunders employs spelling ‘mistakes’ as well as unusual usage and sentence construction to make the voice less human, more non-human. He even

changes the spellings on occasion to reflect how a fox might be more attuned to the sound of a word, rather than how it is spelt:

One day, walking neer one of your Yuman houses,  
smelling all the interest with snout, I herd, from inside,  
the most amazing sound. (Saunders, 2018: 3)

Here, there is a focus on sound and smell, two of a fox's most acute senses. In this, 'human' becomes 'Yuman' – reflecting how the animal has heard the word spoken; the fox also listens to sounds from the house instead of concentrating on how the house looks; he also focuses on how the house smells through the use of his 'snout', indicating how a fox relies on smell to navigate the world; Saunders capturing well here the fox's *umwelt* in just one sentence.

Saunders plays with spellings also – 'Yuman', 'neer', 'herd' – to make the language of the fox look less perfect, less human on the page; making the animal's unfamiliarity with the written word more obvious. Saunders states that without the 'bad' spellings, 'it wouldn't be that interesting... [but through using them] it became kind of poetic' (Kachka, 2013); implying that the voice of the fox came alive precisely because of the use of flawed language and rejection of some grammatical and linguistic rules.

Using such a point of view as this is clearly of interest to Saunders, who finds that the constraint of writing from an animal's point of view is liberating rather than constricting: 'Any kind of thwarted perception is interesting to me because then you have to squeeze into the weird corners of language, and that, paradoxically, is really freeing' (Kachka, 2013). And although he found the voice by accident, without consciously trying to represent an accurate vulpine point of view, it is clear he has considered the fox's *umwelt* from the allusions to both sounds and smells, as well as

from watching them. In reference to Tolstoy's depiction of a horse's point of view in *War and Peace*, Saunders says: 'All I can learn about you [the interviewer] is through observation... it's the same with a horse. You just look at the horse's behavior and then you try to approximate its mental state with some kind of language' (Kachka, 2013).

In giving voice to the dragonfly I find my own 'weird corners of language' (Kachka, 2013), making the voice less human through unusual word usage, considering all the while what the insect *might* perceive. I focus specifically on vision which is their strongest sense (rather than hearing or smell, for example) including colour perception, which can be seen in the way the dragonflies make reference to colour throughout their narrative. For example, 'blue to us is multiple, is many,' they say (see *Dragonfly*, page 56), implying that, with their enhanced vision, the colour is everywhere and everything – it 'is alive, is male, is female, is water, is plant... is look in our prey eye as we snatch to eat it' (see *Dragonfly*, page 56). For them, blue is not just an individual colour ascribed to a particular thing but is instead an essential part of their reality – it is in objects, behaviours and also experiences. The colour is not related to sadness or loss though, as it might be for humans, which the dragonflies acknowledge when they say, 'it is not the blue of a human hand without another human hand to hold it' (see *Dragonfly*, page 56). Instead, for the insects, blue, or colour more broadly, is ubiquitous; it is representative of all that their life is. *Their* life, that is, not ours.

I also consider how dragonfly eyes, which cover most of their heads, are able to see in all directions at once, which I interpret to mean an ability to see into the past, present and future all at the same time.<sup>26</sup> I also consider how they can focus in on a particular target, as they do during prey capture (Angier, 2013). Here, though, they focus on

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<sup>26</sup> This idea is also reflected in how the narratives are located in different times – Henry's strand is in the present, CB's in the recent past, Arthur White's further in the past, and the dragonfly narrative itself straddles all times: 'you say – past, present, future... we say – old-now, now-now, coming-now – all is Now (cos eyes better – see all times' (see *Dragonfly*, page 87).

Henry, who they connect with after he falls into their world – the river – and they address him using second person:

see we see/but not always seen/with eyes that watch all  
ways/below, behind, above, in front/we zero in/target,  
find one among the/many, in colours that human/not  
even got names for

like now,/we see you, boy-child –/egg, nymph, adult-  
wing, all –/in colours you not dream of, your/reds, your  
greens, your yellows, yes/but others that spark and  
spill/that split open the sky (see *Dragonfly*, page 41)

In some ways, I go beyond what Saunders says about observing and making assumptions from my human point of view about what a creature may be thinking – an outside–in way of working. Instead, through the use of scientific research into the dragonfly – for example, their colour perception – I am attempting the reverse; to start with the dragonfly and look outwards (in–outside). From non-human to human. So, even though there is some anthropomorphising, for example through the use of English, albeit a sort of pidgin English, it could be argued the reverse is going on in places: arthropodomorphising, perhaps – with the insects projecting *their* characteristics onto humans, for example with regard to their life-cycle:

you here for life-cycle too, boy-child/egg, nymph,  
emerge, adult/start finish/grow, feed, find mate, make  
egg –/you do same but in human way...

we see you in old-now, in now-now, in coming-now/...

but we know you ok in coming-now, we know you

finish cycle (see *Dragonfly*, page 166)

Here, the dragonflies address Henry by leaping into the future to tell him that he will be OK and that he will complete his own life-cycle. The insects consider what is, arguably, their own purpose in life, the most important thing for them – to be born, procreate and die – and project this onto him, believing this to be his own reason for being. They do not speak about what a potential human life-cycle involves, but instead speak about their own in an attempt to reassure Henry about his future life.

In this, the dragonfly point of view is limited, reflecting the insect's own umwelt. They discuss their own life-cycle and, even though they acknowledge that humans may do things differently – 'you do same but in human way' – they do not attempt to convey their message in human terms, instead only referring to the dragonfly life-cycle.

Focusing on their lived experience, from within their own umwelt, enables me to foreground the dragonfly point of view as much as possible, which leads to a decentring of the human in the novel – in this narrative strand at least. As such, the dragonflies are placed at the heart of their own story.

The insects communicate in a borrowed form of English – 'we say, with words that you [Henry] give us' (see *Dragonfly*, page 14) – but the language is broken, the grammar non-standard and certain words are replaced by other, more unusual ones. For example they do not talk about the 'past' but instead the 'old-now', just as the 'future' becomes the 'coming-now'. Also, when they mention colours, they say some are ones 'you not dream of' (see *Dragonfly*, page 41), because even though the dragonflies can see them, through their ability to perceive colours beyond the human spectrum (grrlscientist,

2009), humans cannot. As such, these colours are not even given names because they do not exist in human consciousness nor, therefore, in human language (which the dragonflies are using to communicate); they are just referred to, then, as ‘others that spark and spill’.

This, therefore, privileges the insect point of view, decentres the human and also de-humanises the language, a little at least; the insect not conforming to human expectations with regard to how English is used, and also speaking from within their own *umwelt*, communicating to Henry who has infiltrated their environment, their bubble, as a result of him falling into the river.

In this narrative, language is made strange, the non-human foregrounded and given a voice. By doing this, I am attempting to make this a more-than-human story, placing the dragonfly not just *in* the novel at a surface level, but at the heart of it, in its blood and bones. A symbolic presence, yes. Symbolic of loss. Of strength. Of surviving. But a real presence also.

## Adult: A Conclusion

*‘As aerial predators, adult dragonflies have few peers. Their extraordinary agility is unequalled among animals, except perhaps some of the smaller birds of prey, bats and bee-eaters; and they have an outstanding ability to detect the movement of small flying objects’* (Corbet and Brooks, 2008: 1)

### *Taking flight*

We lift up. We fly.

Me, the novel. We have grown, been changed by each other during these past few years and now it is our time to take flight from each other. It is our time to be what we have become. As Toni Morrison says, ‘[the act of] imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, *becoming*’ (Morrison, 1993: 4). And so we have *become* – the work and me. Neither of us really existing before, in the exact form we are now. Neither of us knowing *what* we might become, or *how* we might change. But we have, in unimagined ways, in order to be what we are now. Such is the way of writing; of being caught by an idea and pursuing it, of being transformed by it. There is a strange kind of alchemy that happens with creative work. I just hope this poetics has managed to capture a little of that at least, showing whoever reads it the path this research has taken, the life-cycle of it: the unexpected difficulties and challenges, the occasional strangenesses, as well as the many moments of uncertainty and magic.

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My life has been all dragonflies for the past few years – learning about them, reading about them, seeing them when out and about. Just a few days ago, for example, I was at Cuerden Valley Park near Preston on a gloriously hot June day; perfect dragonfly

weather. Although I am still no expert, I am certainly more knowledgeable than I was, more able now to identify a number of species, as I did while there: a banded demoiselle damselfly perched on some vegetation overhanging a pond; common blue and azure damselflies, a number of which had mated but were still attached, with the male holding the back of the female's head as she lay eggs into the water; a male broad-bodied chaser whirring over the pond and then perching on a leaf as the sun blazed down. There is a particular thrill that comes when seeing a dragonfly or a damselfly and either recognising what they are or trying to – I'm not sure that feeling will ever leave me now. Or that I would want it to. The dragonflies are in me. I never want them to go.

Even though this particular piece of research is at an end, I know that dragonflies are part of who I am now, and that they will live inside me always – and so there will never be a sunny day in the years to come when I will not look for them or attempt to identify them. I will forever have one eye to the water or to the sky just to see what *might* be there; which of these amazing, fierce, wondrous, terrifying yet beautiful predators might be patrolling their territory, snatching unsuspecting food on the wing, linking and making that wonky heart with another as they couple and make the generation that will follow them. The life-cycle continuing.

The dragonfly that sparked all this back in 2014 could not have known – and neither would it have cared – what impact it had on me as I stood in that queue. But such is the nature of ideas. If they are good ones they take up home in you, make a dwelling of your body as they feed and grow, feed and grow. And even when the work is done, they leave something of themselves behind – never departing entirely. It is a possession of sorts, an inhabiting, as Zayneb Allak (2017) and others have implied. Although one where the possessor is never quite cast out. No matter how much you might have wanted it to be when the work was difficult or unbearable. I can only hope that I might



be possessed in a similar way with other ideas that come along to take up home inside me. I hope they will be as illuminating and transformational as this one has been.

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I am sitting at my desk in the late morning on another sunny day. I glance out towards the little gardens that lie in a row along the back of the houses, but don't see any dragonflies slicing through the air. Occasionally, brown hawkers come here, patrolling or sparring with others, but it is not quite the time for them yet. It is usually late summer before they come. Another month or two and they should make an appearance as the days begin to condense and contract towards autumn. If I am allowed a favourite of these creatures, then the brown hawker is probably it. They are just as their name says – brown, vintage looking almost with their beautiful chocolate bodies and dark amber wings. They are handsome, striking. And, usefully for me, easily recognisable from a distance because of the colour of their wings and how they catch and hold onto the light. They are the only species of dragonfly that I can see from a way off and know immediately what they are. Each time I manage to identify one I feel triumphant. 'There, a brown hawker,' I announce to whoever will listen. 'Look at the colour of its wings. Not clear like most of the others.' And they will look and say, 'Oh, yeah' and there will be a lifting inside me, at this sharing of knowledge, this spreading of information. *There, a brown hawker*, I think to myself. *Aren't they magnificent? How can anyone not be amazed by them?*

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It is true that I am not the person I was when I started this research, and yes, the dragonflies are partly responsible for that. But grief is responsible also – caused by the unexpected, terrible, painful, heart-hurting, impossible, unhealable loss of my dad. I have been transformed by loss. As Judith Butler says:

...one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever.

Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance. There is losing, as we know, but there is also the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned. (2006: 21; emphasis in original)

And this is true. At least I now know it to be true. Grief changes us in ways we cannot know, that we cannot predict or plan for. We cannot prepare a map for it so that we will know how to navigate our way through it when such darkneses make their way into our lives. Grief necessitates a transformation that may not be anticipated or wanted, and yet, as Butler suggests, it is one that *will* happen, and we will have to submit to it. Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie agrees: 'It does not matter whether I want to be changed, because I am changed' (Adichie, 2020). For her, it means she is now painfully aware of her own mortality and as such has to 'write everything now, because who knows how long I have?' (Adichie, 2020). This urgency to create, to try to make the most of life, is the same feeling that is within me now too – and perhaps is an expression of grief also, albeit a more positive and productive one. As Adichie says, 'We don't know how we will grieve until we grieve' (Adichie, 2020).

Joan Didion, in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, a book about her own sorrow following the sudden death of her husband, says that, '[g]rief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it' (Didion, 2006: 188). Our grief is our grief, and ours alone. And we will not be able to know it until we arrive at it – and maybe not even then. As such, I

almost feel like saying that as griever we have to ‘wing it’ – another dragonfly analogy – but this is too light a phrase for the heaviness that grief can bring... although there is some truth to it. We have to find our way moment by moment. In reality, we just have to get through it the best we can and learn to live with whatever comes with it. That is all we can do. It is the only way we can make sense of this senseless thing that has happened to us.

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‘Adult’ is the final stage in the life-cycle of the dragonfly, and this is what it means to me at this moment in time: despite being almost fifty, I have always felt somewhat childlike, as if I’ve never quite grown up or become the adult I should have been. I often think that others perceive me in this way too – as someone who is stunted perhaps, stuck as the child she was, a bit Peter Pan because of having so very little to show for all these years on Earth. A line in Helen Macdonald’s *H is for Hawk*, about the loss of her father, sums up my own thoughts perfectly and, as such, causes me pain when I read it: ‘*No father, no partner, no child, no job, no home*’ (Macdonald, 2014: 207; emphasis in original); she thinks this as she observes a man and his child, as he asks her about the hawk she is training during her grief. The pain of her loss is as sharp as the talon of a falcon for a moment. And yes, that is me. No dad, no partner, no child, no home of my own, and, after the PhD, no job. It is strange to be this age and to not have what so many others take for granted. And so, there may be some truth to how I think others perceive me. Or maybe it’s all just in my imagination and I’m projecting my own thoughts onto them. But writing this novel, and in particular losing my dad during the writing of it, has made an adult of me I feel. Finally. I am more at peace with all of my faults and failures. More attuned to and accepting of the potential painfulness that comes with the vulnerability caused by loving someone. More aware of the pain that others feel.

Grief has transformed me in numerous ways. I am more accepting of my own limitations now. More aware of the impermanence of things, of how little we really own and possess anything. The Japanese phrase ‘mono no aware’ – loosely translated as the pathos of things because of their transience<sup>27</sup> – has interested me for years, but now I *feel* its meaning and the sadness at the core of it, rather than appreciate it as an idea or concept. I am aware of this impermanence every day. And every day I try to remember to look for what is good in my life, and to appreciate it.

In the context of grief, for me – and also Henry – ‘adult’ does not mean to get over the loss and move on, but to instead accept it as part of who I am now, to live with it. To understand that my dad is not here while also feeling that he *is* here – as Henry does with his mother also. To feel the sadness of that absence while also being open to his possible presence and those moments when I hear him inside me, making me laugh. In this regard, the thesis is a rejection of Sigmund Freud’s and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s theories of grief and is instead an embracing of the continuing bonds theory. The ones we love may no longer be visible, that is true, but they are here. They are with us. We hold them inside us.

As for the novel, it has become more than I foresaw all those years ago when I first had this idea. It has become as much dragonfly as it was possible for me to make it – both symbolically and at a deeper level also. How so? Well, the dragonfly is there in the story itself, with Henry and Clara looking for them when out and about, CB finding out about them and looking for them with her own dad, and they are there in the dragonfly’s own story, of course.

The dragonflies even helped to direct the narratives too. When writing the Arthur White sections of my novel, for example, the dragonflies mentioned in each part

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<sup>27</sup> See <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/japanese-aesthetics/#MonoNoAwarPathThin> [accessed 9 June 2021].

inspired descriptions and incidents in the subsequent CB sections. The brown hawker mentioned in the first section (see *Dragonfly*, page 20), for instance, inspired my characterisation of Arthur, in that he is described as always having worn brown suits – same as the hawker does; something which is a key part of who he is as a teacher as well as a slightly eccentric middle-aged man. The section on the ruddy darter, which outlines that ‘once they’ve found a perch, they’ll often fly off to catch something and then go back to it’ (see *Dragonfly*, page 33), leads to a memory of CB’s where she and her father first spot a ruddy, and then behave in the same way as it does: ‘Me and you climbed the tree... finding our own perches... only [coming] down to pick up sandwiches or crisps or biscuits, climbing back up the same tree with them clamped in our mouths’ (see *Dragonfly*, page 36).

The ‘adult’ dragonfly is there in the structure too – not just the story; as I had hoped. As Jane Alison says, ‘fiction can be wildly *other*’ (Alison, 2019: 15; emphasis in original) and, for me, this has meant trying to embed the dragonfly as deeply into the novel as possible, without this seeming forced or unnatural. The way I have done this is by splitting the novel into three sections that reflect the dragonfly’s life-cycle – ‘Nymph’, ‘Emergence’, ‘Adult’ – which also map onto my ideas about grief and how someone might move through it from that painful, newborn grief, before beginning to emerge from it, to eventually accept and live with loss. Recognising all the while that grief is a life-cycle. That it will ebb and flow throughout my life. That it will always be present in some form.

I have also incorporated dragonfly biology into the structure by having CB’s narrative be made up of ten sections, which reflect the fact that the dragonfly abdomen consists of ten segments (David, 2019), the markings and colouration of which often help with identification, especially between similar species. Here, the segments are coloured with CB’s narrative and these are distinct from, but also attached to, Henry’s

narrative through the decline and potential loss of a parent: Henry has lost his mother and is distanced from his father; CB is losing her own father. I intersperse these sections in and among Henry's story to thereby give the impression of segmentation on a dragonfly's body; meaning that the dragonfly can be recognised as a presence at both the level of structure as well as in the stories held within it. It is there if you look at the novel from a distance and it is there if you peer at it up close, through a magnifying glass. The dragonfly is written into the novel's DNA as well as into its skin.

One limitation of the novel is that I was unable to succeed in my aim of having the placement of the dragonfly narrative on the page reflect each stage – for example, having their story run in a single line along the bottom of the pages in the 'Nymph' section, then moving up the page in the 'Emergence' section, and finally flying above the page in the 'Adult' section. Although I was able to achieve this through the use of text boxes in one draft, the narrative just did not work in this format. First of all, it was difficult to implement – having to cut and paste individual lines of text into boxes on each page<sup>28</sup> – and also, because of this, almost impossible to amend or edit afterwards. It was also difficult for anyone to read. Should it be read all at once? If so, should it be read before or after reading Henry's and CB's narratives? Should it be read at the same time as them instead, i.e. as you get to each page, you read one line of the dragonfly story as well? But this makes it difficult to access their tale, to achieve any kind of flow or momentum. Ultimately, I had to abandon this idea and instead a new one emerged – to have the dragonfly narrative interspersed with the others – which allows for better flow, as well as enabling the dragonflies to interact more with the other strands.

This 'failure' with regard to my original idea, however, enabled further innovation and experimentation in the novel – through the use of unusual formatting and

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<sup>28</sup> Word's text box function limits the number of links that can be made between text boxes, therefore I could only link some text boxes but not all.

typography. Now, the fragments of dragonfly voice have been arranged in such a way throughout as to reflect movement or aspects of the insect itself. For example, lines of text have been laid out fluidly across the page to highlight how a nymph might move when underwater (see *Dragonfly*, pages 13–14). Or, when the dragonflies talk about their vision, the text is structured in such a way as to resemble a pair of dragonfly eyes (see *Dragonfly*, page 41).

As dragonflies are such visual creatures, certain words have also been edited to visually represent what they mean, for example ‘*falling*’ drops off one line and onto the one below (see *Dragonfly*, page 13); when the dragonflies discuss the ‘*too-tight*’ of their skin, the spacing in the word is condensed (see *Dragonfly*, page 71) to reflect the constriction they might feel in their own bodies just before emergence; equally when they talk about how they will ‘*fatten to full-grown*’ as adults the spacing in the word ‘*fatten*’ is increased so that the word itself expands (see *Dragonfly*, page 72); further, when they discuss flight and moving up ‘*into the new/ world of air*’ (see *Dragonfly*, page 118), individual words break off from their lines and reach up into the page, as if taking flight.

Therefore, what I originally perceived as a limitation in the novel, a ‘failure’, has actually become an opportunity for experimentation and change, for new thinking. Abandoning my original plan enabled me to restore flow and readability to the text while also enabling typographical innovation, which has led to the dragonfly becoming even more embedded into the novel than it was, such that the insect is even present visually – in the way individual words appear, how they shrink or stretch, how they move or even fly into the white space of the page.

### *Life-cycle*

A different June day and I look out of the window again but it is cloudy and windy – not ideal weather for adult dragonflies at all. They will be sheltering in and amongst any vegetation until the wind drops and the sun breaks through, and then they will reappear again. To fly and feed and find mates, to seed the rivers, lakes and other waterbodies with all that fresh new life. Their lives going on again. The life-cycle continuing.

It is not just the dragonfly life-cycle I am thinking of here though. Grief has its own life-cycle. As does writing too. And I feel within me now the end of this story's life-cycle, but, yes, the potential starting of another. There is the egg of an idea that has been with me since being a teenager that is just now beginning to waken. And with it, there is an inkling of symbolic potential. The hint of metaphorical depth and resonance. Perhaps it is time now for that particular egg to grow and hatch, and for this new idea to feed and flourish into something bigger, something more. Only time will tell though if the idea 'has legs' (these kinds of analogies are everywhere with writing once you look out for them). But what else is there for me to do now but to be open to it, to allow it the space to grow? To watch and wait and to hope that one day it can *become* something... that *we* can become together. And if it can, I hope it will reach out and rise up into the world. That it will spread its wings. I hope that it will be bright and alive and wild. And, of course, I hope that it will fly.



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