

Mr Bentley has always done everything by himself.

And now he would again. His suit is still imprinted with yesterday's creases. The book on his lap still smells like Ginnie. The suit is fittingly black, the book, crimson. It is a particular smell; he files through his memory for a classification. It is somewhere between midnight gallivanting and girls' sundresses, but he cannot locate the volume in his mind.

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Memory

Perhaps they had been together, just yesterday? *They had sat together, in this mahogany room, and each had read the other.*

“This was a Poet —
It is That
Distills amazing sense
From Ordinary Meanings —
And Attar so immense”²

They had each touched the book, tasted the words, torn apart the thoughts. They had been together — he had someone else, all to himself. They had loved, until she had stopped. She had shared her accomplished words with him, both those which had brought her fortunes, and those that were only written for their eyes. They had shared something, and then they had shared everything. He had had someone other than himself.

² Dickinson, E. (1862). “*This was a poet.*” In: The Poems of Emily Dickinson. Ed. Franklin, R. USA: Harvard University Press. (2005). p. 206.

They had had their differences; she was a Poet, and he wrote prose. She had taught him phrases that he had never bothered to learn, because the words implied her presence. Before Mr Bentley had met Ginnie, he had only been in love with characters. He found perverse satisfaction in loving only that which was infinitely unattainable. She had begged to teach him to love something tangible.

“Of Pictures, the Discloser —
The Poet — it is He —
Entitles Us — by Contrast —
To ceaseless Poverty —”³

She had fallen into his world, possibly by chance, or possibly by the workings of some metawriter who controlled his life. He had ventured from his house, resting in the outskirts, into town; a rare occurrence. He enjoyed the shops in Cambridge, for they reminded him of his decision to not spend four years of his life confined to the stigmatic ways of Harvard.

A reserved memory warmed the present chill in his chest. The room had been filled with bookcases, each overflowing with selections from every classification. He always lingered in the poetry section, for it was a reminder of a genre which escaped his repertoire. She had been sitting on the floor, the tips of her hair touching the carpet as she tilted forwards.

The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson.

³ Dickinson, E. (1862). “*This was a poet.*” In: The Poems of Emily Dickinson. Ed. Franklin, R. USA: Harvard University Press. (2005). p. 206.

It was hardcover, thickly layered and crimson. Fourth edition, 1962. It was twenty years old. The very same edition of a book he had bought in his early youth. She bought the book that day. Once their lives became irreversibly tangled, two copies of the same book began to reside in his library.

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Present

Sitting in the tasteful room with him now were both copies. She had left hers behind for him when she parted. The crimson spine is broken by tears of white; the entrails of the book itself, as if the thoughts contained in the words were too violent. The liveliness, the voracious opinions – they brought the death of the book itself. That’s what the words essentially are to him now; dead.

He believes that a thought stops living the moment its author frees it from his mind. Or her mind. They had both preferred the works of female writers; writers with uncontainable emotions. What had enchanted them most was a woman’s ability to recreate a real moment, either embellished or stripped.

He sits in the room once again, with only his thoughts for friends. For a time, it had become impossible to tell where his thoughts ended and hers began. They had become so furiously twisted in each other’s minds that they were no longer alone. Together, they were alone, but they had been alone together, so it hadn’t been lonely.

In her departure, he was taken into the embrace of an old foe. He was aware of his folly, his baseless beliefs. He would always be left alone.

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Memory

*“He found my Being — set it up —
Adjusted it to place —
Then carved his name — upon it —
And bade it to the East”⁴*

Two hundred and seventy four millilitres of boiling water roll in her mug. His tea cup is empty. Ginnie outlines the lip of the mug, the traced loop configuring the borders. Grasping the edges of the tea bag, the water laps at the undersides of her French-tipped nail beds. Her fingers break the plane. The gentle drip of the extracted teabag is the second noise in hours to break their contented silence. She tosses the bag onto an abandoned saucer.

He watches her, feeling each sensation just as she does. She places the cup on the polished desk without a coaster – the heated ceramic scalds her palms. He runs his finger along the Taurus’ already marked on the table, but does not lever a coaster between the cup and the desk.

She extends her arms upwards, and arches her spine. So still she has been sitting. The peaks of her vertebrae snap against the beginnings of her shoulders. He resists the urge to stroke each twisted knot of her protruding joints. Nothing sexual, just inquisitive. She elegantly balances the teabag on her lips, the still-steaming liquid filling the cracks. Parting her lips, she inhales, with the grace of a chain-smoker. Boiling peppermint rips at her teeth, runs along her gums; the flavours break through the wall of her teeth to assault her tastebuds.

⁴ Dickinson, E. (1863). “He found my Being — set it up —.” In: The Poems of Emily Dickinson. Ed. Franklin, R. USA: Harvard University Press. (2005). p. 231.

Mr Bentley fancies a cup of tea. She is gradually aware that his gaze has been fixed upon her whilst she has been drinking. She places her cup on her thigh for too long before she is aware of herself. He watches the red burn dilate. Her lips still burning, she parts them once more, allowing the final slaves of peppermint to escape. She pauses. Her eyes connect with his unwavering stare. He puts away the words he had been reading. Leaning into her, he takes her carved neck between his hands and covers her mouth with his.

*“We talked between the rooms,
Until the moss had reached our lips,
And covered up our names”⁵*

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Present

The skirting board has splintered away from the off-white wall on Mr Bentley’s half-landing. From the top landing, he can see that seven hand spaces from the left-hand corner of the wall, a piece of the skirting board is missing. Perpendicular to this, the shadow of lightning is etched in the wall. The split in the wood is cracked away from the window frame. The framework is perfectly matched to the skirting board, perhaps even splinted from the same dead oak tree.

⁵ Dickinson, E. (1862). “*I had been hungry all the years.*” In: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Franklin, R. USA: Harvard University Press. (2005). p. 439.

“As old as Woe —
How old is that?
Some Eighteen thousand years —
As old as Bliss
How old is that
They are of equal years —”⁶

His eye line ventures beyond the crack, but the glare from the moon deters his gaze. His top lashes touch those of his bottom eyelid and still the pattern of light remains. The night clouds are afire. Fingers raised to the sky, his vision is skewed, and he can trace each lit edge with his too carefully manicured nails.

When she had been with him, there had been no distinguishing from night and day. Their lives were not regulated by any means other than their fleeting desires. The sun and moon had been equally bright as they flooded the rooms of his Queen Anne home. The rays of both had set alight the scenery which contained each moment of their entangled lives.

Every room's walls were lined with windows, each a regularised individual. She had held a specific fascination with these portals. These translucent bridges between their world with that of all others', they fascinated Ginnie. Mr Bentley had never understood the appeal of anything other than his self-composed existence. He thought the windows to be a punishing reminder that something larger existed than what they built within his walls.

On this night, quickly approaching the coldest hour, the lingering touches from the moon remind him that this brightness soon too will pass. This great self-actualisation, his haunting thoughts, they will dissolve. One day, they will be so infinitesimal, that they can be classified as non-existent. She had taught him many thoughts and tempered his emotions.

⁶ Dickinson, E. (1872). “*As old as Woe —*.” In: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Franklin, R. USA: Harvard University Press. (2005). p. 492.

Without Ginnie, he would surely be left to his sole existence once again. Surely, he would be able to write?

Mr Bentley is overcome by a terrible thought. She had taught him many great things, but she had also stolen from him. Every day, she had been stealing in exchange for her education. She was not conscious that she was a thief, in fact she would have defined herself as a lover, if pressed. Ginnie had been stealing his loneliness, yet it was his loneliness that provoked him to write. He yearned for the old embrace of words, words which he could mould to form ideas. These ideas would evolve into thoughts, both those from his head and from his pen. These thoughts would file into moments, and these moments were his states of existence. These moments would obligingly be filled with people, and he would fall in love.

He had fallen in love many times, with the inanimate. If there was one thing that Ginnie taught him, above all else, it was that loving the animate is what would break him.

“Together chiefest they are found
But seldom side by side –
From neither of them tho' he try
Can Human nature hide”⁷

She had pulled herself out of an abyss in the time that he knew her. She was too accomplished to drown in the dark thoughts swimming through her head. It was, however, this darkness that stirred her. Mr Bentley had seen the ink stains in her works, brief, poetic phrases, very similar to the cadences of her speech. The abyss which she had escaped had begun to call his name in her departure. On this night, the moon is giving the sole light which

⁷ Dickinson, E. (1872). “*As old as Woe –*.” In: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Franklin, R. USA: Harvard University Press. (2005). p. 492.

illuminates his darkened mind. Woe has overcome him with the cold wash of self-apprehension.

*

Memory

“The plenty hurt me, ‘twas so new”⁸

She feels the cold ivory teacup between her fingertips, long before Mr Bentley realised that their tea had gone cold. Hours poured over words bring forgetfulness of one’s surroundings. He collects his cup between his hands.

“Tea is no longer what it was, once it is chilled.”

She drowns the tea party. The table could have been set for eight, if one were to account for the cups and saucers present. She is aware of his gaze which traces her and the crimson-sleeved book on the crowded table. Holding his wandering vision, she blindly places her book down. At the scrape of connecting ivory cups, his focus sharpens. The touch of near-diminished candles, each firmly rooted in a silver candelabrum, reaches his tea city. She knows his thoughts before he has built them.

“When was the last time these words saw daylight?” she muses.

He smiles, then lets it slide. His teeth catch on his bottom lip.

“Only the words of two given pages would greet the sun at any time.”

The stretch between her hollowed nose and bitten lips twitches as she attempts to refrain from acknowledging his truthful wit.

“That crimson book of mine would be terribly faded,” he continues.

She smiles freely.

“I would think the book mine, Theodore?”

⁸ Dickinson, E. (1862). “I had been hungry all the years.” In: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Franklin, R. USA: Harvard University Press. (2005). p. 439.

The floorboards groan, some flat, some sharp, as he makes his way towards the second furthest window. The curtains had come with the house, wherever the house had come from. He pauses. Plaited ropes with tassels hold bows on the golden hooks tied either side of the window. He has never untied them.

His lungs burn with the sudden intake of air as she pulls his body into her fragile hold. The evening's chill has painted her arms a mottled blue. He twists in her grip, now facing her. His quickening heart matches her rasping breaths. She presses her entire body against him, as if to reach the curtains.

The yellow moonlight catches their embrace. Her hips introduce themselves to his upper thighs. Her breasts graze across his chest as she drags in each breath.

He pulls her head into his, their teeth kissing before their lips.

"Ours," he breathes into her.

"Emily's words are ours."

*

Present

Mr Bentley is seated in an uncomfortable wooden chair. He is forced to swim through the waves of nausea washing through him. Ginnie would have chided him for being melodramatic in his thoughts, but he is inundated. The sealed windows to his left are, as he had always thought them to be, dreadfully inane. Whilst they had the correct balls and bearings and pulleys and levers and whatever else it is that a window requires to function, the house has been sold to him on the condition that they did not open. He owned an entire room of windows which were fixed shut. Not temporarily – someone had sealed them.

When she had left, he opened all of the curtains. She was always mocked him for hiding from the sunlight. He hadn't dared tell her that it was the moonlight which petrified him. Once he had opened the curtains, all seventy-eight which decorated his house, he felt as if closing them was betrayal. He had opened them for Ginnie, for whatever was left of her. He was beginning to understand that she was seeping out through the glass panes. She was becoming a memory, further away from his present.

He was a human, prey to human nature with its horrific tendency to remember the pain of one's past. The burn of her radiant smile upon his face did not compare to the burn of their teacups. He would inevitably forget the way light caught on her raised cheekbones. He would forget all of the beautiful things about her appearance, in a futile attempt to accept that she was no longer in his house, or his life.

“How well I knew Her not
Whom not to know has been
A Bounty in prospective, now
Next Door to mine the Pain.”⁹

He had begun to fall out of love with her, once she had taught him what love was. He had much preferred his definition, just thoughts. His memories were entirely coloured by the people who featured in them. Emotions were the palette with which he painted, seeping through his misunderstanding of Ginnie. He knew that he would never entirely understand her. No one is ever to understand the Poet.

⁹ Dickinson, E. (1864). “*How well I knew her not.*” In: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Franklin, R. USA: Harvard University Press. (2005). p. 359.

This was not to say that she was not missed. He yearned for her, for the hours they had shared. For everything that she had made him realise, for all of the regrets with which he was now full, he couldn't escape his admiration of her. She was something entirely other than ordinary. She had taught him everything, and yet, she hadn't really taught him anything new. She simply made him aware of that which he was previously ignoring.

As Mr Bentley sits in his chair, he is filled with resentment. He longs to break his self-imposed confines, to smash the window. Pent up frustration shreds his thoughts. She stole so much from him which he will never be able to reclaim. He stands, so quickly that the chair tumbles backwards in surprise. He descends upon the window, wrenching the static levers with reckless force. The frame is beginning to splinter in protest at its remobilization.

His best efforts are hindered by the previous owner's fixations. A blind frustration has been building within him since her departure. The bottle is becoming unscrewed. The bottle shatters. He cries to the God he doesn't believe in, a guttural noise so desperate that he is shaking. Unblinking, he claws at the window. The tip of each of his fingers leaves an oily scrape against the glass. He curls his fingers unto his palm, his hands forming two perfect spheres. He draws his wrists back towards his shoulder, before striking the window. The jar of the cold glass slaps his elbows. He withdraws and then repeats the pained action.

A crack ripples through the glass. From the left edge of the frame, it reaches towards the right. Another thud. The crack can now reach. A final blow.

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Memory

As a boy, Young Mr Bentley had owned a wooden toy box. When empty, with all of his possessions strewn across the oyster coloured carpet, it was the perfect size for him to hide in. For the greater part of time, his mother ordered that his toys remained in the box, lest she discard them. On the white top, a stretch of green leather, insulated with something soft, was fixed to the box with brass pins. On each pin was a miniscule imprint of a teddy bear.

He loved to sit atop the box, his legs just long enough so that his feet would dangle off the edge. Breaking his mother's precious rules, he would get out all of the bears which he owned, and just sit with them. He wasn't a child who ever held tea parties, for he probably didn't know what they were. He much preferred his clever conversations with the bears, about the colour of sunshine or the feel of the coins in his money box.

These conversations would be held in secret, for the lives of his teddies were not to be spoken of with anyone else in his house, especially not his father. His father believed that a young boy should be given blocks for constructing and books for reading. On his eighth birthday, Young Mr Bentley received a typewriter from his father. He didn't have any use for it, other than as a glorified throne for his favourite bear.

It was a grey July afternoon when his father arrived home early. He had spent his day as he spent each day of his summer break – in conversation with what he knew to be the only logical beings in his house. He didn't know what his mother spent her days doing, other than that she spent most of them in her room. Her drawn expression was warning enough to Young Mr Bentley, who dared not disturb her. When his father unlatched the door, he heard her rise from her resting place. He just went back to his conversation with his bears, expecting not to be disturbed.

A conversation about the smell of the kitchen when porridge was being made was occupying Young Mr Bentley and his friends, and he did not hear the footsteps on the stairs. The curtains were drawn, his room darkened – their meeting was closed to all other inhabitants of the Bentley dwelling. A streak of light burned his room as the door was thrown open. Mr Bentley, Senior, stood in the doorway. The conversation paused. Young Mr Bentley looked to his father, who was staring at the teddy bears in his son's arms. The carpet made no noise as Mr Bentley, Senior, crossed the room to where his son sat.

“No son of mine will squander his time playing with bears!”

Mr Bentley, Senior, seized the bears from his son, throwing them across the room. The only audible noise was that of the occasional hard nose, or glass eye, striking the frame in the bears' unceremonious exits. The only bear left in the room was seated upon the typewriter. Mr Bentley watched, horrified, as his father took it into his hands, and wrenched at the seams. The bear's arm tore away, his stuffing entrails beginning to protrude from his body.

“Since you so love to converse with that which is not real, I don't see why you shouldn't be writing stories.” His father stalked from the room.

Silently, tears began to obscure Young Mr Bentley's vision. With his only friends gone, and no one to talk to, he pulled the typewriter down from the desk. Emptying the few things that were left in the toy box, Young Mr Bentley climbed in. With the typewriter resting on his bony knees, he began to press the keys. With several clicks, words were formed, and eventually he had written sentences.

He had nothing else left to do, so he wrote.

*

Memory

*“Nor was I hungry, so I found
That hunger was a way
Of persons outside windows
The entering takes away.”¹⁰*

His kitchen needs to be labelled. The pots are suddenly where the plates were a week ago. The plates have now taken residence in the cutlery’s former home. God forbid should they want soup – it would have to be taken in tea cups, for the dishes had run away with the spoons.

Tonight, he will create a beautiful banquet for two. He opens his fridge, the old seal sticking to the metallic frame. The fridge is full of food that will expire before it is used. The tray of oysters concealed by an old blue towel is resting on the top shelf. He places the carefully wrapped package on the bench adjacent to the fridge.

He can’t remember a time where he has not known how to shuck out an oyster. He takes each shell into his hands very deliberately. He methodically checks that each oyster is still alive. Can the oyster hear him? He doesn’t think it has ears to hear. What about a brain, to think? He imagines what it is like, knowing you are about to die. He was essentially killing these oysters. So, he is a murderer.

¹⁰ Dickinson, E. (1862). “*I had been hungry all the years.*” In: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Franklin, R. USA: Harvard University Press. (2005). p. 439.

He turns on the faucet and cold water hammers the sink. He takes a shell from the pile and thrusts it underneath the flow. The oyster tightens its shell, leaving no gaps for it to breathe. He takes a scrub brush, and caresses the oyster's shell. He must be kind in procuring their deaths. It is soon apparent, as he always has found, that simple caressing is thoroughly ineffective. He must be brutal, scraping the wire brush again the shell.

From the third drawer, the cutlery drawer, he takes a knife. The sharpest knife, it whittles into symmetrical point. A shucking blade. He should put the glove on his left hand. It is made of woven silver loops and it makes him feel like a Knight, but he has long stopped playing pretend.

He forces the blade between the lips of the oyster. He twists, the oyster fights. No one really wants to die. He wins the battle. He discards the unusable half of the oyster. He places the other half down on a white tray. He slaughters the rest of the oysters.

With the inelegance of a man riddled with amnesia, he cannot recall how she likes her oysters to be served. He does not wish to disappoint – he will have to ask her, and his cheeks will flush pink in humiliation. He had always had a painfully perfect memory.

He lowers himself onto the first, polished stair. His right and left hands equally tug at the plastic finishings on his brown laces. The stitched heel of each shoe relinquishes its respective foot. He removes his black suit jacket from its tight embrace around his shoulders. A wooden hanger will play his doppelganger until he redressed. A man is never finished dressing until he is wearing a suit.

His tie has come unfixed from its usual weaving. He slips his index finger between the satiny twist, the pocket of material warmed by the words his throat has spoken. He unhangs himself. The tie is slung over the balustrade. He begins the two-flight ascent.

With each sock-softened step, his fingers find a new button to unfix. On the half-landing, his chest is entirely exposed. There are no visible marks. Reaching the top landing, he pauses once more. He removes his brown leather belt, his family ensign burnt into the rough hide.

The door is ajar precisely, as it was when he left it. She would still be in what was once his chair. She would still be reading the crimson book, even though it was committed to memory long ago. He drops his shirt on the floor. He raises his arms in the air. His shoulder blades grind. The door protests as he opens it.

She is not reading.

She is not even writing. Both the crimson book and her black, hardback notebook are on the floor. The notebook has been kicked over to live by the fourth leg of the table. Asleep.

Mr Bentley softly strides over to her. She has been swallowed by serenity. He is shaking as he begins to break this spell. He lowers himself onto his knees. His lips hover inches from hers. He wears a smile to imprint upon her lips. He inhales, bracing himself to catch the imminent shattering.

He is burnt by her frozen lips. Her hands hold the same chill. She does not stir as he claws at her neck, wrists, searching for a pulse. Begging for a pulse. Her arms have been painted in another coat of blue. Her lips have lost their biting red colour, and have been frosted with a purplish opacity.

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Imagination

“If anybody could have saved me it would have been you ... I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been” ¹¹

He has emptied more tea cups that he can count with one hand; each cup was not filled with tea. *Something stronger*, he had called for, before he realised there was no one to call out to. He reached for a sugar cube, the ornate spoon, and his weary cup. He pours the once chilled ice water over the cube before he realises there is no green liquid in the tea cup. The bottle has been emptied.

He fingers fumble for words on a page, but he can't find her crimson book. He settles for a blue cover, considerably less worn than that of the crimson. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf* – posthumously published by Leonard. Her husband had loved her so much that he gave her words to the ravenous world. Mr Bentley wouldn't share the words that had saved Ginnie in life. They were not written to be published – that success had been had before they had met. These were her words that pulled her out of the black.

The abyss calls his name. It, however, is not his. They have shared many things, but she always stopped him from embracing her darkness. Then it disappeared. Words dissolved it. Like the water dissolved the sugar. The sugar coloured the transparent green liquid with a white wash. Then he coloured his thoughts with the contents of the tea cup. Repeat. Monotonous actions have become a meter to which he times his life.

¹¹ Woolf, V. (1941). “*Final Letter to Leonard Woolf*.” In: *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Vol. 6 (1936-1941)*. Ed. Banks, J. & Nicholson, N. UK: Stratford Books. (1980). p. 137.

The room collects around him. Bookshelves line each wall – where there are no cases, books have been piled in haphazard stacks. He wants Leonard’s words. Talented women are always remembered – but what of their lovers? Nails curled into the polished wooden armrests, he attempts to rise. The chair is stronger than him. The emptiness in his chest begins to fill with black gravity.

He resigns to his seat. The back of his head fights with his chin, pivoting like a child’s seesaw. His oesophagus burns as the aniseed attempts to re-emerge. The ache of the teacup’s contents begins to hurt like an old wound. The seesaw has stopped creaking. He can’t move. His mind reverberates, slamming from a thousand thoughts a minutes, to fixations with a mere word.

The lashes of his top lid repetitively kiss their friends below, until they come to rest together.

Only on such an ordinary day could such an ordinary thing occur. It is in the ordinary moment which one changes. The ordinary moment will be remembered as extraordinary, unexpected, surprising. Any number of synonyms will come to describe what happens. But before a moment was extraordinary, it was, by all means, ordinary.

On that one day, she will have put on her coat, of horrendous material, but it will have hidden what needs to be concealed. Starting briskly, she will soon have realised she had no reason to hurry and so she will have slowed her journey.

Her left toe will have emerged into vision, and then will have been left behind. Her right toe will have jumped forth in anticipation. She will proceed forth.

Perhaps she did have reason to hurry.

He is waiting by the riverbed, but he will go unnoticed. Or, maybe she will cut him with her gaze. He won't be Theodore Bentley, but Leonard. Perhaps she will emerge from the wet coffin, as she did just ten days ago. Maybe another lost lover had stopped her then. If she were to emerge, she would trace her steps, this time with a definite reason to hurry. She will explain to Leonard that she had fallen. Fallen into the River Ouse, an entire mistake. She will burn the beautiful words she wrote to Leonard, and a half-century later, he will find no comfort after the death of his love.

What are extra hours of limitless loneliness in his life, if they were to save Virginia? If he were to save Virginia, maybe he would have known how to save Ginnie.

He fails to recall that Virginia will fall at her own hands, Ginnie to her own body. *But are the hands not part of one's body?*

Virginia descends upon the riverbank.

She pauses. She recalls. He observes the specificity of each of her actions. Each is the product of a highly developed thought. She denounces her ability, but it still very apparent to all who witness her. She has survived "three hundred and nineteen days of headlong and yet slow-moving catastrophe."¹² He would wish he could give her one hundred more three hundred and nineteen days, save for their conditions. He can't help but empathise with Virginia, for catastrophe is rarely survivable.

Perchance he would be a substitute. Leonard is still alive, Leonard still loves her. He has no love left alive, no one to call him.

¹² Woolf, L. (1969). *The Journey Not the Arrival Matters: An Autobiography of the Years 1939–1969*. UK: Hogarth Press. p. 201.

She has begun. She lets her cane fall onto the riverbank, the short curve striking the mud, which spits upon her shoes. She no longer has any need to keep them clean. She places her hat to her left side, upon a rock where she had often sat. She takes three steps closer to the churning river. Her pale wrists escape from the coat as she collects a rock. It is deliberately too heavy for her to hold. She places it in the pocket of her coat, ripping the silk lining from its threaded fixes. Her chest rises, and then falls. The edges of her mouth curl towards her besotted eyes. Water fills her shoes. The tide cuts at the ankles, but she does not notice. Her now awkwardly fitting coat is held by the river. Slowly, in complete silence, save for the cries of the tempestuous river, she sinks.

He sees her chin disappear first, then her lips kiss the surface. The ugly water wets her cheekbones. Her eyes remain open until she completely submerges. She has left, and he has simply watched.

All he will ever be able to do is watch.

*

Memory

The way in which she wildly throws around the top of her head is too much for her neck to control. Her hair is unruly. Freed from its usual bindings, it creeps past her bare waist. The intimates of her torso are modestly covered, the cups of her bra lifted by the thin black straps.

His kitchen has not been silent since she arrived. They had purchased an old record player, purely to emulate decades passed. Decades which they have forgotten, or perhaps never experienced. She thought only by the hours, with precise disregard for the future, as if it might not ever occur. The turntable projects a French piece, piano, of this decade. He

never understood how to categorise music. Words were his muse, bars merely confused him. She controlled both forms. She begins to spin.

It is dark, and she cannot distinguish where her domestic realm ends, and the natural world begins. He knows very clearly that it is just the window, but she was never a lateral thinker. Her reflection throws her laugh back. The spark he sees in her does not reflect in the window's copy of the night.

Her reflection teases him. He does not understand it. A replica of the love of his life, the sole other with whom he has shared authentic emotion. A duplicate of the genuine is incomprehensible.

She forgets the boiling pot; the element is beginning to leave a lasting singe on the bottom of the steel vessel. She hurls herself around the kitchen, the arches of her feet suspended by invisible pointes. He hears the bones in her feet crack and lock as she crushes them under her body, onto the slate.

She throws both of her elbows above her head, her forearms obligingly following. Her fingers fall into grace, a position which years of ballet corrects: index lowered, but not touching thumb, ring finger following, pointer extended, pinky forgotten, yet elegantly poised nonetheless.

Subdued hisses warn her that the water has almost entirely evaporated, but she does not hear the call for she is engulfed in the sob of music. He circles her, but she does not want a partner – this is no pas de deux. The moment passes, and he pulls the pot from the element. He fishes for a softened vegetable from the pot and offers it to her. She pauses. The rot of the wooden spoon sprawls through her mouth before the starchy taste can register within her.

A single batter of one eye, but not a wink nor a blink, was a token of her approval. Her approval no longer meant anything to him, she so freely gave it. Not like how it once had been. The piece builds into a crescendo, continuing at a forte. The chords of grand pianos haunted him; that is why he kept a Steinway in the adjoining room.

She offers her elbows to the ceiling once again, a deformed interpretation of fifth position. Her shoulder bones lock. If only he could capture this moment, hold his wingless angel in his mind forever. But she continues. A carefully choreographed dance, performed to a one-man audience.

He gently glides through her dance; she is completely enraptured. Her ribcage juts outward as she arches her back, fancying herself to be a cat. Her claws fall to her sides. Her wide hips betray the stories which she does not tell, permanent bruises colouring her body. Like a wind-up ballerina on her last pirouettes, she is stopped on one leg. Her right hand traces the horizontal indent of her pelvic bone – the last place she allowed him to kiss her.

She grounds her heels. The right foot taming the left, she pins her too long pyjama bottoms to the floor. The dance is over. He begins to stir, then stirs the pot. Fiercely, for the forgotten meal clings to the bottom of the pan in defiance.

He can feel himself burning in anger. It begins to seize him, and so he must exercise his control. A still moist piece strikes the burning element. Fireworks of steam escape their cases; the screams of a thousand closely avoided burns erupting in the room. She resurfaces for just a moment.

Her eyes scream at him the words she will not utter. She would write them, but there is not time. Her body falls by each angular increment, eighty-three degrees. The evening's rain intensifies, nature's cynical applause as she strikes the slate. She begins to crack before she shatters entirely. Each piece of her splits against the floor, until she is but a broken heap.

She is broken, but will continue on. She always does. He is blindly insufficient – he will never be able to collect all of her pieces. Time slows, not with the elegance as it regards her with, but with bitter acknowledgement of the consequences of these last moments.

Ginnie parts her lips, locking her gaze upon his weary face. “I don’t think two people could have been happier than we have been.”¹³

*

Present

Mr Bentley turns the hot faucet to the left. It takes three spins to encourage the plumbing to grant him pressurised water. He places his hands in the sink, disturbing the water’s flow. The gradual warmth surprises him, and yet he does not withdraw his hands. The skin around his knuckles, which has begun to fold with the creases of time, has assumed a red colouring. The white crescents on each of his nails begin to take the heat of the water.

With the shocked awareness of sudden feeling, he feels the slices of a thousand paper cuts upon his hands. He wrenches his hands from the still-running tap. The heavy water builds a steady rhythm in the old sink. He turns on the cold faucet, and the tempo changes. He gathers the old cake of soap between his raw hands. Placing his hands under the now moderated flow, he watches tiny bubbles form, and promptly slide off his hands, into the sink. How many bubbles are popped, how many are left behind, while the others venture down the drain? He turns off both faucets, his arms still dripping water. As the sink drains slowly, he watches, until there is just one bubble left behind. He extends a finger to ruin it.

¹³ Woolf, V. (1941). “*Final Letter to Leonard Woolf.*” In: The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Vol. 6 (1936-1941). Ed. Banks, J. & Nicholson, N. UK: Stratford Books. (1980). p. 137.

“It makes us think of all the dead
That sauntered with us here,
By separation’s sorcery
Made cruelly more dear”¹⁴

The kitchen reminds him that it is well past the hour at which one is supposed to eat. He smiles to himself. Convention is much too foolish for him. Nonetheless, he is acutely aware of his hunger. He had always been the one to cook – she had been too absorbed in her words. He had cooked, not for himself, but because of his insistence that she must be fed. He opens the fridge; the chill bites at his still too warm hands. The empty state assists his foraging. Once again, he finds a towel covered dish of oysters.

“She dealt her pretty words like Blades—
How glittering they shone—
And every One unbared a Nerve
Or wantoned with a Bone—”¹⁵

Mr Bentley takes a knife from the third drawer. He gently runs his finger across the blade, establishing its dullness. He reaches into the first drawer underneath the sink. It is due only to recent use that he is able to find it with such ease. He takes a silver length in each hand, and begins a swordfight with himself. His footwork has significantly improved since last week’s battle.

¹⁴ Dickinson, E. “*The saddest noise, the sweetest noise.*” In: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Franklin, R. USA: Harvard University Press. (2005). p. 635.

¹⁵ Dickinson, E. (1862). “*She dealt her pretty words like Blades—.*” In: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Franklin, R. USA: Harvard University Press. (2005). p. 212.

The sharpened blade is ready to commence work. He uncovers the oysters. There are too many dirty shells in the dish. He begins the shucking ritual once more, with a less delicate touch than he had previously given them. *What was it to matter if he killed them now?* He had slaughtered many times before, no arrant consequences had arisen.

He takes an oyster with parted lips. He taps it; there is no reflex. He taps it again. He rotates the faucet, a too fast stream of cold water falls from the head. He holds the oyster under the cold flow. It still does not respond. It is already dead, of no use. He picks up another oyster, and another. He discards an entire dish of oysters, for each one has passed.

“She never deemed—she hurt—

That—is not Steel's Affair—

A vulgar grimace in the Flesh—

How ill the Creatures bear—”¹⁶

He had always believed oysters to have a terribly mediocre flavour, especially when left untreated. He had opened cupboards at random. Keeping the spice jars on one of the bench tops would be entirely more convenient. The location of the bottle of olive oil had escaped him. A near-defeated tug at another cupboard revealed the oil. Collecting the oil from the bench now, he returned it to the cupboard from which it had come. His successes in his search were now entirely invalid.

¹⁶ Dickinson, E. (1862). “*She dealt her pretty words like Blades—*.” In: The Poems of Emily Dickinson. Ed. Franklin, R. USA: Harvard University Press. (2005). p. 212.

“To Ache is human—not polite—
The Film upon the eye
Mortality's old Custom—
Just locking up—to Die.”¹⁷

The descending darkness has filled the room with a hollow chill. As Mr Bentley empties the lifeless shells into the trash, the open latch on the most eastern window pulls his attention. He does not recall opening this window. The curtains were drawn, he had certainly done that – but the window?

He put aside his musings and barricaded the outside from his house once more. He then drew the curtains. It was the only time since they had been opened that he had dared close them again. The room was now sealed, even the door closed. He enjoyed seclusion.

He returned to the stovetop, a shallow pan rests on the grate. He pushes in the gas clicker, and it softly utters its namesake noise. Four clicks, before the gas begins to run through the cylinders. He leaves the flowing gas, and takes a match in his hand. He watches it burn, until the flames begin to lick his fingertips.

¹⁷ Dickinson, E. (1862). “*She dealt her pretty words like Blades—*.” In: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Franklin, R. USA: Harvard University Press. (2005). p. 212.

*

Present

Mr Bentley takes both copies of the crimson books within his hands. It had become overwhelmingly apparent that she has left her copy to him; she was not going to return for it. As he sits alone in his ornate room, he can hear the echo of their conversations. Each had left its mark on the room, for these conversations were few and far between. Placing his copy on the table beside him, he examines Ginnie's copy. He lifts the dust cover, and finds a message scrawled to a previous lover.

"William,

What I want to say is I owe all the happiness of my life to you¹⁸.

I give to you all of my love.

Julia"

There was no date and the ink is faded. Mr Bentley draws in wracked breaths. He is suddenly very aware that what he and Ginnie had had was not unique. There had been at least two other people who has shared what he had thought his own. With stuttering hands, he replaces the dust cover and closed the book. Taking his own copy, he carelessly turns the pages.

"I was so happy I forgot

To shut the Door And it went out

And I am all alone –"¹⁹

¹⁸ Woolf, V. (1941). "Final Letter to Leonard Woolf". In: *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Vol. 6 (1936-1941)*. Ed. Banks, J. & Nicholson, N. UK: Stratford Books. (1980). p. 137.

¹⁹ Dickinson, E. (1865). "I cannot buy it – 'tis not sold-." In: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Franklin, R. USA: Harvard University Press. (2005). p. 401.

Reflection Statement

Word Count: 1462

“I want this work to leave all its doors ajar.”¹

My story, “I looked in windows for the wealth I could not hope to own,” explores the concept of disconnection of the artist due to their creative inclination. I additionally sought to examine the effect of a Muse on the artist. My story explores the creative devastation which occurs after the loss of a Muse, particularly a Muse who is artistically successful in her own right. I developed my structure to emulate the short stories submitted in the 2009 UTS Writers’ Anthology, exploring the concept of *On The Side*. My intended audience is the literary reader with knowledge of the literary allusions and intertextual references I utilize. The theme of disconnection, woven through the pieces published in the anthology, developed into the dominating theme in my Major Work. The anthology publishes both prose and poetry, and is thus appropriate as my story hybridises both genres.

The disconnection of the artistic individual is the constant theme which controls my piece. Ultimately, it is cyclical, as the final scene returns to where the story begins. Mr Bentley’s loss of “his love” devastates him, but is expected by the reader. He is artistically motivated, shown through “He had nothing else left to do, so he wrote,” in his childhood memory of his father. I attempted to control a complex structure to invert the reader’s perception of the typical interplay between loss and isolation through intertextuality, pastiche and the incorporation of literary figures.

My concept evolved from my examination of Emily Dickinson’s poetry in HSC Advanced English. I particularly connected with the poem, “I had been hungry all the years.” The

¹ Brophy, K. (1998). “Introduction.” In: *Creativity, Psychoanalysis, Surrealism and Creative Writing*. Australia: Melbourne University Press. p. 4.

character basis of Mr Bentley developed from the persona in the piece. I incorporated Dickinson's emphasis on the liminal symbol of the window. The understated sadness in Dickinson's poetry underlies my narrative structure, and my story is formed creating a pastiche of poetry and self-composed prose. The use of her work was chosen to fundamentally establish the literary allusions. Through the hybridity of my piece, the interplay between Dickinson's poetry and my own prose, I sought to emulate characteristics of postmodernist literature. In an attempt to reflect the issue of disconnection, I utilised a fragmented narrative structure throughout the story, typical of postmodernism.

I further explored my concept of disconnection through the structure, which breaks traditional short story form. I intended for the poetry woven throughout to disconnect the reader from the flow of the prose, echoing the disconnection which dominates Mr Bentley's interactions with others. This is highlighted in the phrase "He had begun to fall out of love with her, once she had taught him what love was. He had much preferred his definition, just thoughts," which shows his isolation from others. The postmodernist reinterpretation of a traditional short story was intended to enhance the subject matter of my piece. This is highlighted in the interaction between Mr Bentley and my characterised Virginia Woolf in my imagination scene.

While my short story is written in third person omniscient narration, it is constructed so as to reflect my protagonist's "stream of consciousness." The implied death of Ginnie in the introduction primarily establishes that Mr Bentley is alone. The story explores the interaction between an individual's present actions and the how memories reconstruct one's past. Through this technique, I intended to recreate Woolf's modernist "stream of consciousness" writing style within a postmodernist framework. I aimed to show this through statements including "Can the oyster hear him? *He doesn't think it has ears to hear.* What about a brain, to think?" to enhance a sense of self-reflexivity.

The life and work of Virginia Woolf influenced my story's examination of the interplay between mental illness and the artist. Kaufman's conclusion that "people with mental disorders who also consider themselves to have artistic and creative ability may naturally gravitate toward the medium of poetry precisely because of its personal nature"² influenced my character development of both Ginnie and Mr Bentley. Mr Bentley is originally portrayed as the unsuccessful artist through "He always lingered in the poetry section, for it was reminder of a genre which escaped his repertoire." I created Mr Bentley as the failed artist, primarily to explore the effects of maligned motivation for artistic activity. His inclination to write stems from his inability to enter into the real world, established in the childhood memory where he hides behind storytelling. I chose to create Ginnie as his attempted Muse, yet she also is the successful artist in the piece. I wanted to invert the established stereotype of the Muse as nothing more than inspiration – I instead used Ginnie to represent the strong female. This choice is reflective of my extensive research into Woolf's feminist literature. Ginnie harkens to the published and successful woman, a contemporary Dickinson or Woolf. This inversion is further extended, as she teaches Mr Bentley the emotions which are inherent to human interaction – something he lacks in his disconnection. I attempted to expose this to the reader through the line "She had taught him phrases that he had never bothered to learn, because the words implied her presence."

I drew inspiration from Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* and its intertextual links to *Mrs Dalloway*. My piece is shaped by Ginnie's feminine strength, and the interplay between the successful artists and their artistically unsuccessful lovers. *The Hours* explores the similarities between the Woolfs, and the relationships between Clarissa, Sally and Richard. I sought to explore Mr Bentley's relationship with Ginnie, and how it emulated Leonard's relationship

² Kaufman, J. and Baer, J. [2002] "I Bask in Dreams of Suicide: Mental Illness, Poetry, and Women." In: *Review of General Psychology*, 2002, Vol. 6, No. 3. p. 271–286.

with Virginia. This culminates in the imagination scene, where, in a drunken dream, Mr Bentley watches Virginia Woolf successfully commit suicide. This scene was also deliberately constructed to show Mr Bentley's continual disconnection, in that "All he will ever be able to do is watch."

I layered my piece with intertextual references to present the audience with a perception of the story aware of itself as a construct. I attempted to follow the established postmodernist prevalence of interrelatedness within successful texts. The intellectual rigor of Mr Bentley and Ginnie, and the artistry which permeates their lives, is consequently woven through the story. While I make reference to a nursery rhyme in my statement "for the dishes had run away with the spoons", I also referenced *The Hours* and *Mrs Dalloway*, through my emphasis of "the hours" and the consequences of the actions which occur within the hours.

My independent investigation into the short story form was inspired by Daniel Shaw's short story "Poet's Legacy" from the anthology *On The Side*, where a character recreates Sylvia Plath's life. Unlike Shaw's powerful indirect reference, I decided that the complex nature of my piece required direct reference to the artists. For this reason, I chose for Mr Bentley to engage with the characterised Virginia Woolf in her successful suicide attempt. My story further breaks conventions of traditional short stories through the use of three fragmentary "spheres of consciousness": the present, written in plain text, memory, indicated by italics, and the imaginative present, indicated by the bolded typeset. My piece weaves the three spheres through stanzas of Dickinson's poetry to produce this tapestry.

My independent investigation into the short story form meant my story evolved significantly from my original intentions, most poignantly in terms of characterisation and interiority.

"In a mosaic story, each constituent piece has its own boundaries, its own shape. I'll try to see that each separate incident has a small but noticeable climatic moment. I'll alternate dramatic

incidents with digressions, meditation or sections that explore the inner workings of a character's mind.”³

I introduced another character to Mr Bentley to explore Cunningham's "polarity theory"⁴, which I inverted with a third "character" – the Established Artist(s). Cunningham's theory explores the notion that when two elements are engaged in a situation, they will eternally rotate around a centre; they will always be equally distanced. However, what challenges the polar elements' orbit is when a third is introduced. I used Cunningham's theory to create Mr Bentley and Ginnie as my two polar figures which are bound in this eternal distance. Literature, the words of Emily Dickinson, both in the actual text as well as the crimson book, is the third uncontrollable element which tempers their lives. This relation emulates the effect of *Mrs Dalloway* on Mrs Brown, and therefore Mr Brown and young Richard, in *The Hours*.

Finally, one of the major things I learnt about short story writing "is how important it is for the writing that I stand somehow to the side of my selves (... that I find ways to 'haunt' myself) – and to the side of contexts between discourses to which I hope I have done justice."⁵ I believe my piece has, to a large extent, realised this ambition.

Word Count: 1462

³ Lefer, D. (1994). "Breaking the "Rules" of Short Story Structure." In: *The Best Writing on Writing*. Ed: Heffron, J. USA: Story Press. p. 17.

⁴ Cunningham, M. (2011, May 22). *The Sydney Writer's Festival Presents: Michael Cunningham*. [Lecture]. Australia: The Sydney Morning Herald.

⁵ Brophy, K. (2003). "Creativity." In: *Explorations in Creative Writing*. Australia: Melbourne Press. p. 6.

Mr Bentley rises from the chair. He takes Ginnie's copy of the book as he strides across the room to the burning fire. He pauses. He lifts the book to his face, trying to inhale Ginnie, as if it would preserve her within him. The book has lost her trace, instead greeting him with the familiar smell of sunned paper.

Unblinking, he throws the book into the flames. He watches as it is consumed, the greedy flames cracking in delight. Standing for what feels to him to be hours, the book eventually becomes little more than white embers.

He retreats to his chair, and takes his copy once more. No longer is it just his copy, it is the copy. He will sit in silence, and he will consume Emily's words. For Mr Bentley had always done everything by himself.

Word Count: 7243