

## **RMIT University**

### **Francesca Rendle-Short**

#### **Father work: *just gladwrap***

##### Abstract:

Currently on YouTube is a fifteen-second video posted by Answers in Genesis, a Creationist outfit, dedicated to ‘enabling Christians to defend their faith and to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ effectively’ (Answers in Genesis 2007). It shows a white boy who appears to be middle class in a white singlet on a deserted country road raising and cocking a gun in slow motion at the viewer, point-blank range, with a voice-over, declaring: ‘If you don’t matter to God you don’t matter to anyone’ (Answers in Genesis 2007).

Answers in Genesis is the organisation behind the multimillion-dollar Creation Museum in Kentucky, United States. This ‘apologetics ministry’ originated in Queensland, Australia, in the 1970s. Then, it was called Creation Science Foundation and my father, John Rendle-Short, was its patron and founding chair of the board of directors. My father was a ‘young earth creationist’ who believed the world was made in six days and that the whole universe was only 6000 years old. He even believed gladwrap was ‘ordained by Almighty God’.

Writing my father.

Hélène Cixous once wrote: ‘I ask of writing what I ask of desire’ (Conley 1994: 15). In writing my father, can I too write *desire*? Can I write without judgment, unconditionally? Is it possible to create what Kevin Brophy calls ‘strange poetry’, writing that allows ethical questions a presence in the writing but ‘somehow stands aside from the impulse to take an ethical stance’ (2011)?

In this paper, as a way to tease out these ideas, I will discuss the making of a work with the name *Just Glad Wrap* for an exhibition entitled The Five Obstructions. In this case, a work of writing for walls by a writer who normally writes for the page, a portrait of her father, or ‘other’, that becomes a portrait of desire and possibility. This is also a paper about its aftermath, about what happens post-exhibition in the writing about the writing, after the wall has been rubbed out, painted over.

##### Biographical note:

Dr Francesca Rendle-Short is a writer and academic. She is a novelist, author of the novel/memoir *Bite your tongue* (Spinifex Press), *Imago* (Spinifex Press), and *Big sister* (Redress Novellas). She has also written for the theatre and is co-author with scriptwriter Felicity Packard (*Underbelly, MDA*) of the short play entitled *Us*. Her short fictions, photo-essays, exhibition text, and poetry for the page and for the wall, have been published in literary journals and magazines, online and in exhibitions. She has worked variously as a

radio producer, teacher, editor, freelance writer and arts journalist. She has a Doctor of Creative Arts from the University of Wollongong and is the Program Director of Creative Writing at RMIT University. She lives in Melbourne.

Key words:

ethics and creative writing, poetry, father, fundamentalism, writing process, drawing, desire

### **Writing my father.**

When I finished making the work that afternoon, I sat and gazed at it for a long time, drinking it up. Yes, I thought, I had done it. I knew it in my bones. I was different now to how I was when I began. Changed. It was a lovely quiet afternoon too, a public holiday in the middle of the city, that particular quiet of pleasure and rest and recreation. Stray noises of laughter from afar. It was the Queen's birthday long weekend, strangely appropriate, I thought, given I had just finished making a portrait of my father for the walls of a gallery, given he was an old-school monarchist.

I called the work *Just Glad Wrap*. It was a portrait of desire and longing, a daughter for her father. I had set myself a challenge: could I make a work about my father that was not judgmental? Could my father and I inhabit the space together, unconditionally? Could I characterise this work, retrospectively, in the way Kevin Brophy might do, as 'strange poetry' (2011)?

*Just Glad Wrap* was part of a group exhibition entitled *The Five Obstructions: someonehastodosomethingbeforeanyonecandoanything* made for the Margaret Lawrence Gallery in Melbourne in June 2011 (Copley 2011). There was no curatorial brief for this exhibition. Instead, independent curator Martina Copley interrogated and confounded the usual but implicit contract between artist and curator and came up with 'a list of five things that characterise an arts practice' or, in the way she preferred to put it, 'five things you would never do'. Mine were:

- never say no
- never not turn up
- never not cry
- never say never
- never ever say everything.

Each artist, she said, would work with one obstruction. The obstruction she gave me was to 'steal an idea'.



*stealing an idea*

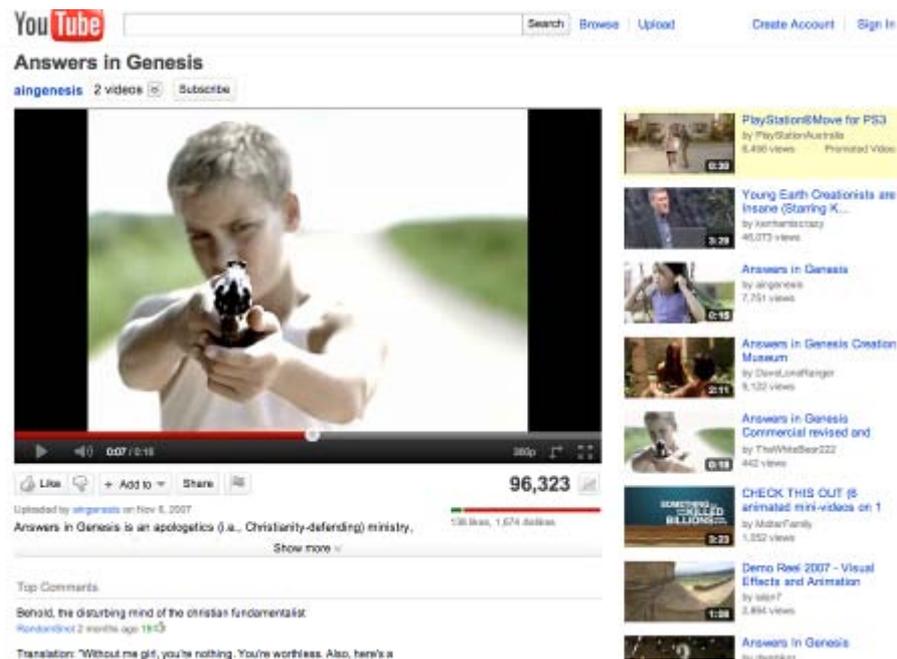
In this paper I will explore not only the way in which the stealing of an idea becomes a catalyst for the making of a work — in this case, a portrait of desire — but I will steal the idea of ‘obstruction’ and ‘refusal’, or better still ‘freedom’ (to use Copley’s nomenclature), in order to construct this paper. I will create ‘a kind of improvised scaffolding that allows things to be seen’ (Copley 2011) using those ‘five things’, reordered for this narrative. This is a paper that explores the process of making or ‘witnessing’. It asks: how does the imagination narrating the self and other come into being, for display? It also explores the idea of writing about an exhibition post-exhibition, after the wall has been rubbed out, painted over, as ethical questions and dilemmas continue to linger.

***Obstruction 1: never say no***

Eleven days after the close of *Just Glad Wrap* on Friday 22 July 2011, and after I had written the initial abstract for this paper (due 1 July 2011), Anders Behring Breivik went on a shooting spree in Norway. It was world news. Breivik killed over 80 people in as many minutes. He was described by police as a ‘fundamentalist Christian with right-wing views’ (*Telegraph* 2011).

My father could also be described in this way — *never say no*.

It took me back to the small video that is still available on YouTube posted by the Christian fundamentalist organisation Answers in Genesis (2007).



This shocking video was one of the catalysts for *Just Glad Wrap*. It is of a young boy cocking a gun at the viewer, at point-blank range. The boy is white and appears middle class. He wears a white singlet and is standing on a deserted country road and in the fifteen seconds it takes, he raises the gun in slow motion at the viewer. As the trigger clicks into place a voice-over delivers a chilling line in a strong, steady, smooth American accent: ‘If you don’t matter to God you don’t matter to anyone’ (Answers in Genesis 2007).

The link between Breivik and his reported fundamentalism, and the Answers in Genesis (AiG) video is CEO Ken Ham. On Ham’s facebook site he comments on the ‘unfounded term “fundamentalist”’. He writes: ‘It is sad when just because someone says they are “Christian”, they are labeled automatically as “fundamentalist Christian”’ (2011). In contradistinction, what interests Ken Ham is Breivik’s relationship to Darwinianism: ‘Breivik instead hails Charles Darwin, whose evolutionary theories stand in contrast to the claims of the Bible’ (2011). Ham’s reason for Breivik’s actions, what he refers to as ‘the horrible terrorist actions of a crazed gunman and bomber’ (2011), is not Christian fundamentalism but rather beliefs in Darwin and his evolutionary theories.

So why, I want to know, is the AiG video of a shooting boy still online?

Can’t Ham spot the connection?

### ***Obstruction 2: never not cry***

The shooting-boy video is part of the AiG offensive with the aim of ‘enabling Christians to defend their faith and to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ effectively’ (Answers in Genesis 2007). The video was originally uploaded three years ago in November 2007. Last time I looked (15 November 2011) this video had received

96,323 views, more than any other AiG video, with 138 ‘likes’ and 1674 ‘dislikes’. Currently there are 1308 comments on the site, such as:

‘BRAVO! This is the best ad for atheism yet!’ (InternetDarkLord)

‘Translation: “Without me girl, you’re nothing. You’re worthless. Also, here’s a fucking gun in your face ... that’s sick.”’ (Flyborg)

‘I think that kid knows how to use a revolver. He seems to be holding it with proper technique for the most part. That is nice to see.’ (Jesses001)

Most of the comments express shock at the implications of the message:

‘Is that referring to the psychotic passage in the bible that encourages parents to murder their atheist children by stoning?’ (riverlioness)

‘What sort of freakish twist on the Christian teaching is this? would work better as the intro to a terrorist training video.’ (kidiboar1)

There are comments from people who want to defend their faith:

‘Christians aren’t the problem here, we’re only trying to tell the truth. We don’t kill people just because they don’t believe what we do.’ (DazzieMetallikat)

Some other comments use ridicule as the best form of defence:

‘Basic message: If you don’t believe Christianity, God will send a skinny blond kid in a tank top to walk up to you and put a gun to your head in an extremely slow manner. Wow, I am so scared...’ (shadesofgray100) (Answers in Genesis 2007).

I cannot recall when I first came across this video but I do remember feeling physically sick. The horror of it has stayed with me, deepened because of the shame of my father’s connection, his beliefs underpinning the work — *never not cry*. In the days after hearing about the Norway shootings I checked and re-checked the AiG site to see if the video might have been taken down — *If you don’t matter to God, you don’t matter to anyone*.

### ***Obstruction 3: never not turn up***

According to *The Macquarie dictionary* the word *matter* takes its meaning from the Latin *materia* meaning stuff or material. It is whatever occupies space. As a noun it can also mean ‘physical or corporeal substance in general’, or ‘substance of a discourse’, or ‘some substance excreted by a living body, especially pus’. As a verb it means signify or ‘to be of importance’. *If you don’t signify or take up space with God you’re not important to anyone. So you may as well disappear*.

In our creative writing classrooms, we tell our students to write about things that matter, things that have ‘stuff’. We tell them to write about that which has significance and importance for them, takes up space in their imaginations, their hearts. We urge them to do this to find ‘the rub’, to ‘feel the weight’ of their own ideas and thinking, to connect with their audience. *If you don’t care about what you are writing, if it doesn’t matter to you, I can hear myself saying, how do you expect your reader to care, that it matters enough for them to read on?*

**Matter** *verb trans* = be concerned about, care for, regard, *mind*.

My father.

This is what keeps me awake at night — *never not turn up*.

Answers in Genesis is the organisation behind the multimillion-dollar Creation Museum in Kentucky that opened its doors in May 2007, and in 2010 celebrated its millionth visitor. More recently, Answers in Genesis have started building a theme park called Ark Encounter, made possible with state approval and million dollar tax breaks from the Kentucky Tourism Development Finance Authority. Its star attraction will be a full sized replica of Noah's ark. According to the Kentucky's government website the incentive available for Ark Encounter is a sum of \$43.125 million over 10 years (Lawson 2011).

Answers in Genesis originated in Queensland, Australia, in the 1970s, when Ken Ham was a high school teacher. Then, it was called Creation Science Foundation and my father, John Rendle-Short, was patron and founding chair of the board of directors. When he died two years ago in early 2010, Ham said of him: 'The AiG and our Creation Museum are part of Prof's legacy!' (2010). Like Ken Ham, as I discuss elsewhere, my father was a 'young earth creationist' who believed the world was made in six days and that the whole universe was only 6000 years old (Rendle-Short, F. 2009). He once wrote: 'Our concept of God has gone soft ... If evolution is true, there was no Fall. If man did not fall, then there is no need for a Saviour' (Rendle-Short, J. 1981: 122, ix). For my father, his beliefs and views were unequivocal; there was purpose in everything. Including evil. Sickness and disease. Disability. (My father was a paediatrician and founding Professor of Child Health at the University of Queensland in Brisbane.) He even believed, for example, that the substance of gladwrap was 'ordained by Almighty God'. He believed that if people called themselves Christian and did not believe in the six-day creation story then they were not in fact Christian, they were living a lie and would be judged harshly by God and go to hell. He was a hard liner.

#### ***Obstruction 4: never say never***

Writing my father.

French theorist and writer Hélène Cixous once said: 'I ask of writing what I ask of desire' (Conley 1994: 15). In writing my father, the question I ask myself over and over again is: can I write my father and write desire at the same time? Can I write without judgment? What is my ethical responsibility here when making a work about him — am I kidding myself? Would it in fact be bolder (more ethical) to not write on walls but to write to Ken Ham to ask him to take down the offensive video? Should I enter the debate and add my own comment to the YouTube site?

Because I do protest. But I also make art.

Brian Castro would probably call this sort of writing 'dangerous dancing' (1998). Writing matters of family and shame not only risks putting oneself outside the door, but it risks disinheritance or, as Castro would say, 'a disowning of yourself' (1998).

Castro thinks of it as ‘this continuous *voice*, which runs riot, straight into the pit of hell’ (1998). You open yourself up to attack on all fronts.

But, if we were to accept that writing is, by definition, a transgressive act — as per Castro’s suggestion that writing has consequences (‘as I write, I am already being disinherited’) and that there is a causal link between writing and the act of disinheritance (‘I am being disinherited *because* I write’) (1998) — then I argue it might be possible to create what Hélène Cixous refers to as ‘a non-acquisitional space’, where neither one nor the other makes demands or argue back even when this is hard to do, nigh impossible (Blyth and Sellers, 2004: 15). In the introduction to an interview with Cixous in Paris in 2002, Ian Blyth and Susan Sellers discuss her notion of *écriture féminine*, in particular, the space ‘to desire’ that lies at the heart of Cixous’ philosophy of writing. Here, the self can explore and experience the nonself or ‘other’ in ‘mutual respect, harmony and love’ (15). This exploration and experience of self must be, Cixous insists, a practice of writing. In other words, it is in the *doing* of writing, through process and making and breaking of rules — transgression — that things will emerge if anything is going to emerge at all. At the very least, writing helps you breathe — *never say never*.

Maybe, just maybe, this is getting close to the sort of ‘doing’ that Kevin Brophy is referring to when he speaks of ‘strange poetry’, a particular kind of writing he argues that is not journalism, nor history; not even fiction. Brophy writes:

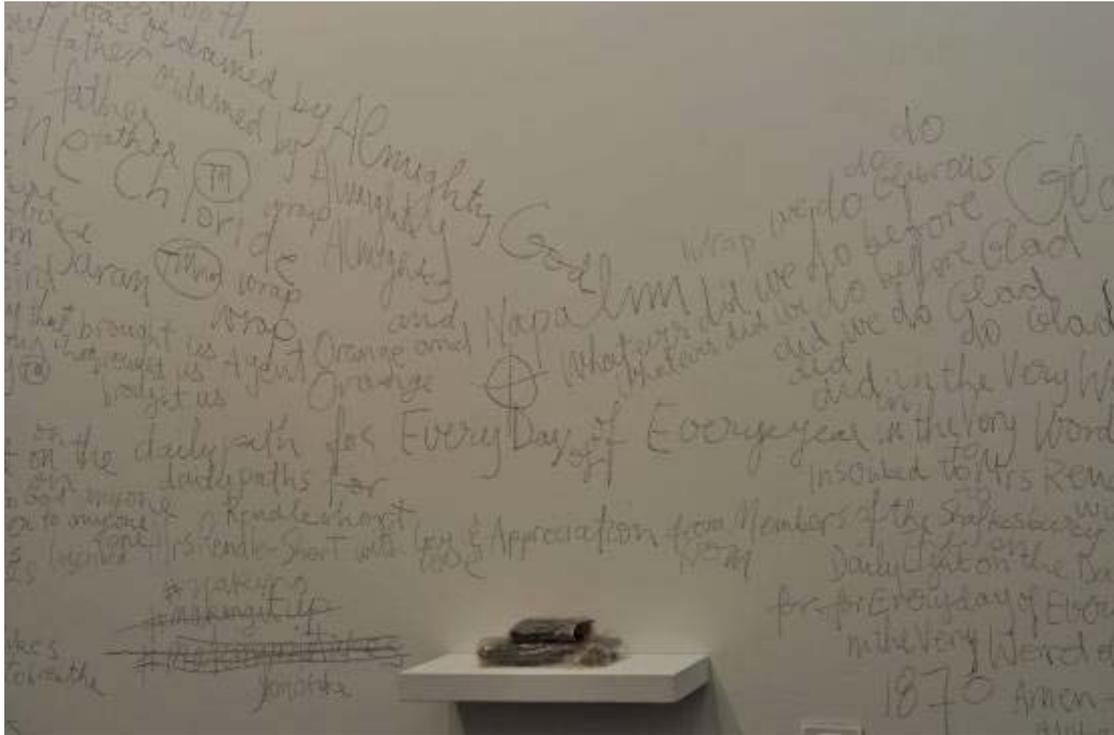
This form of writing, characterised by a particular kind of witnessing, produces ‘strange poetry’ which allows the deepest ethical questions a presence in the writing, but somehow stands aside from the impulse to take an ethical stance (2011).

### ***Obstruction 5: never ever say everything***

Doing father work.



My father had an extensive library of Christian books. In his collection in the nursing home where he last was, there were two leather-bound books wrapped in gladwrap. It was more like sandwich wrap, the sort of bags you squeeze a cut sandwich into to take to school. These plastic bags were very old, tatty, disintegrating in places; the books must have been wrapped like this a long time ago. One was the *Daily light on the daily path the evening hour, a devotional text book for everyday of the year; in the very word of Scripture* and the other was the *Holy Bible Scofield references, 1917*. They were inscribed, respectively: ‘August 31, 1870’, and ‘To Mrs Rendle-Short with love and appreciation from the Members of the Shaftesbury Bible Study Class — February 1924’.

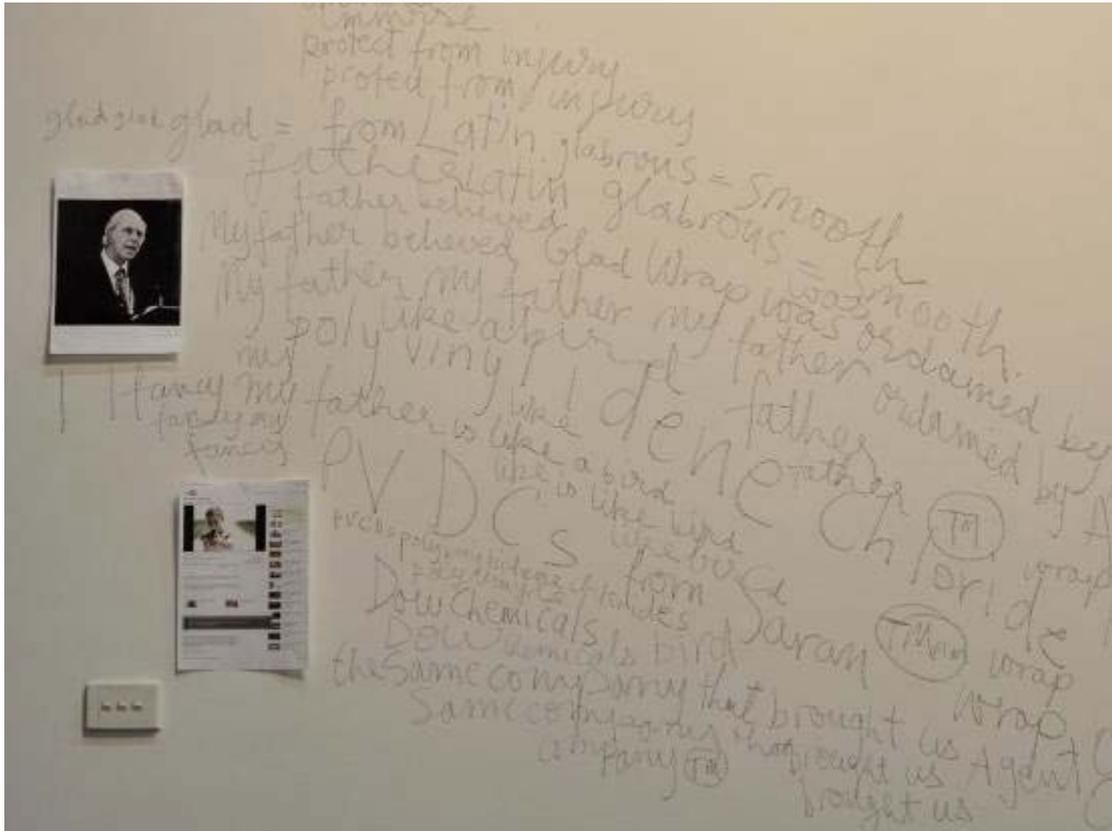


In *Just Glad Wrap* these two stolen books centered the work, floating close to the floor on a tiny painted shelf to form something like an inverted apex. In the light they hovered like the body of a bird caught in the updraft, outstretched wings aloft, wings made of words. The inscriptions became part of the wall written out in full side-to-side, foundation text on which to build the substance or body of the work.

No erasure.

In preparation for installation I had developed a series of texts including these found inscriptions and a found photograph:

- Hélène Cixous as preface: **I ask of writing what I ask of desire**
- definitions of *glad* and *wrap*: **glabrous, giving joy; and engrossed in, envelope in folded or soft**
- thoughts on making: **Learning to fall by falling**



- a found photograph of my father, preaching, that I found on the internet next to which I pinned a printout of the YouTube boy: **I fancy my father is like a bird**
- etymology of the product we know as gladwrap: **The same company that brought us Agent Orange and Napalm: Dow Chemical**
- thoughts on process in reference to Twitter and hash tags and the exhibition subtitle *someonehastodosomethingbeforeanyonecandoanything*: **#dontforgettobreathe** and **#makingmistakesisok**, and
- those inscriptions transcribed from my father's books.

So much for content — choice of words and themes — but it was not writing. Now to the making of the work.

There was no pre-staging of this event, no rehearsal. How was I going to do this in physical terms, in a few hours? How would my handwriting look on the wall — what sort of adjustments would I need to make — and how many words would it take anyway? What about all that white space, had I scripted for any of it — white space and the 'arrangement' of silence, as Cixous would put it (Byth and Sellers, 2004: 101)? And what if I changed my mind — *never ever say everything*?

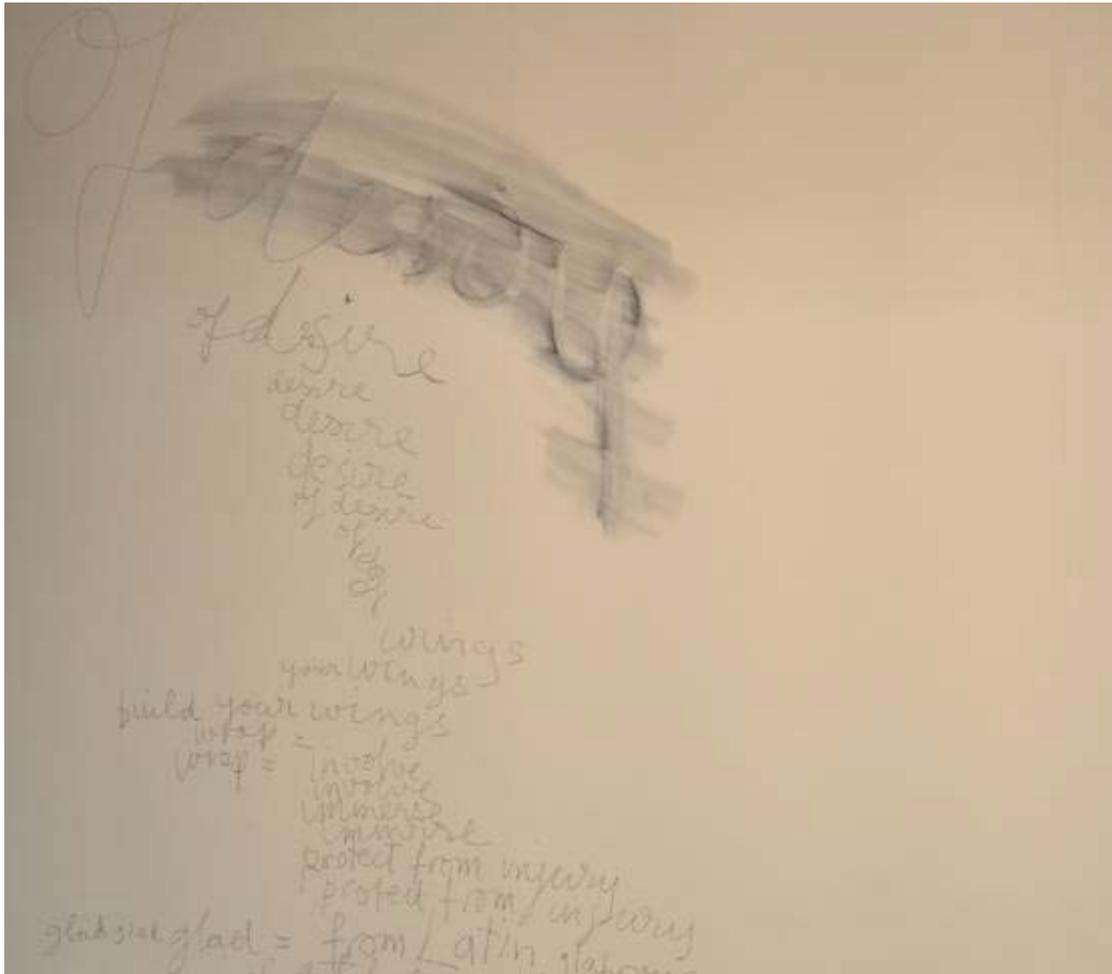
It was more than I had bargained for.

I was inhibited and out of control.

***Finally: refusals and freedoms***

Still, a writer and her practice knows what needs to be done, so I began to layer the work with words and phrases and numbers and meaning, and sweat and tears. I knew from experience that the first draft of anything is always the worst in imaginative and physical terms. For this work, with that initial stroke of those beginning letters there was a commitment to shape and size and display. This work was always going to be very public.

The first word I scribbled/scrawled onto the wall was ‘desire’ —



— although once I placed it there I wanted to scrub it off immediately, hence the watermarks and smudge.

What I discovered during the installation was a poem by Robert Louis Stevenson, a contemporary poet of the time, written up in spidery lettering in the *Daily light* (c.1870). Strange: I had never opened up these books belonging to my father before now, not to read. But now, serendipitously, reading Stevenson’s poetry in this space gave me method and *strangeness*, choreography by which to improvise:

Child, child, child!  
What have they done with thee?  
Where is the little child

Who laughed upon my knee?

But where, where, where,

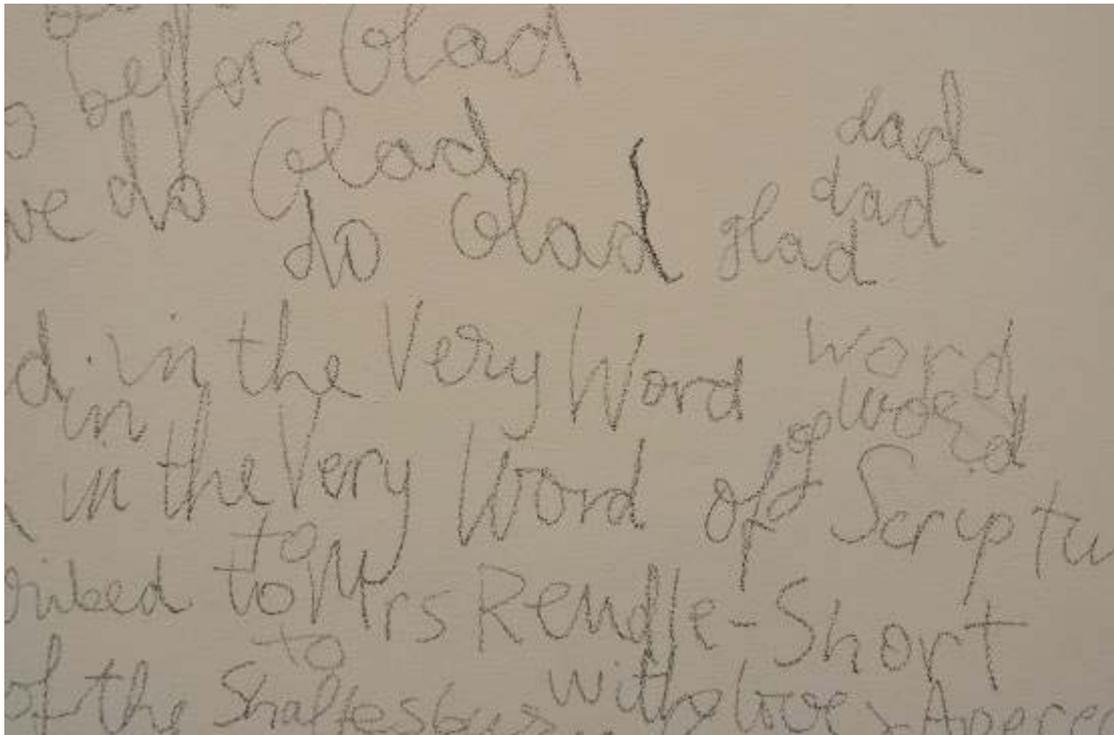
Is the child so dear to me

With the silken golden hair

Who sobbed upon my knee.

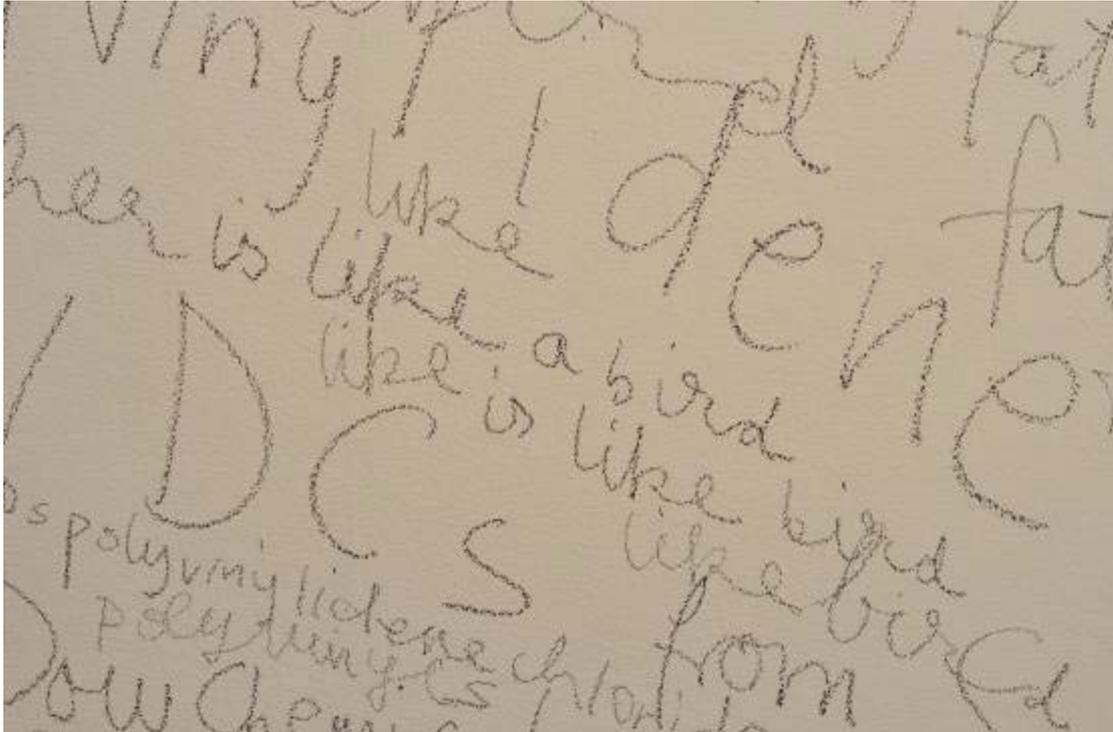
R.L.S.

I began to write and rewrite words and phrases — was I ever *so dear* to my father — to create a singsong voice of poetry, repetition and rhythm: ‘thinking *is* an exercise in rhythm’ (Blyth and Sellers, 2004: 101, Cixous’ italics). I fancy it became what Jen Webb has described as ‘in between writing’ with ‘its mishmash of movement and word’ (Webb 2009). It took on a childlike playfulness. The repeating words became something of a chant, a chorus; a lullaby, just like the Stevenson poem: *child, child, child*. A song of hope.

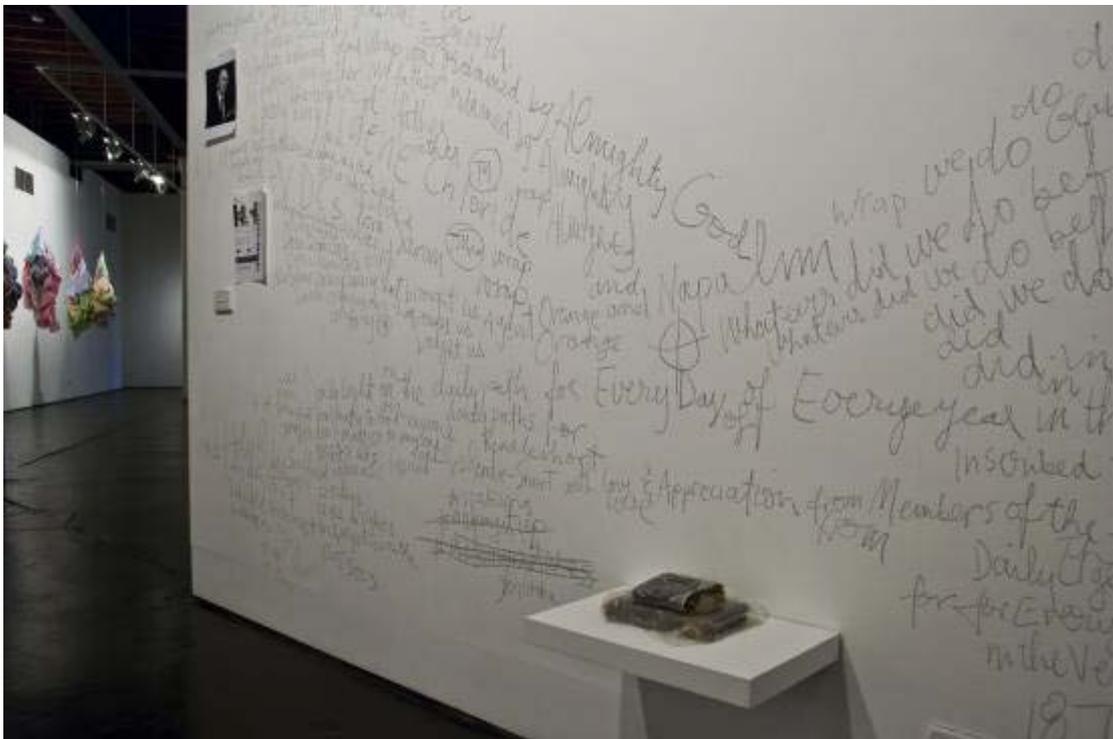


I made deliberate choices. I chose to make mistakes, crossings out. It was raw. Naked expression. A visceral way of writing: of the body.

I crossed boundaries — *my father my father father / fancy my fancy fancy*. Gave the text a physical presence for viewers to fly away with — *wings build your wings wings*. Created dissonance with the overlapping voices — *we do before Glad did we do Glad / dad dad glad*. Syncopated the beat to ruffle and trouble any meaning.



Close up, the writing dissolves. Close up, this discontinuous narrative of fragments and half-stories becomes distorted — *don't matter to matter hits* — inviting the audience/reader to interject, intercede, as she/he hovers like I did over the text in horizontal and vertical readings, and non-readings — *glabrous = smooth / with love love*.

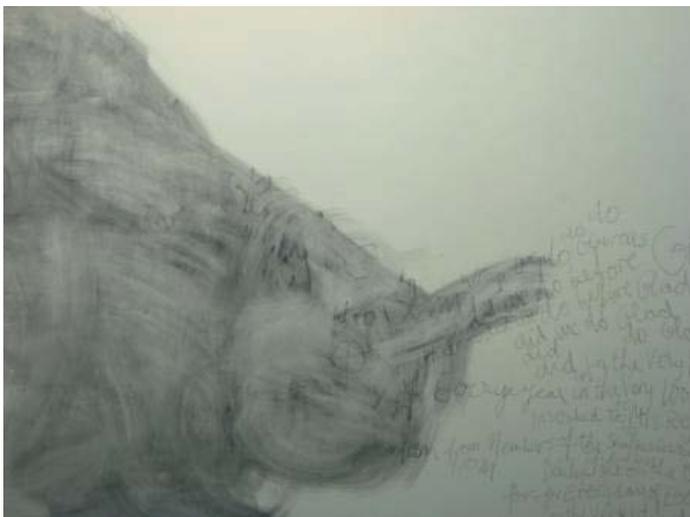


From afar, the words become shape and architecture, sculpture and story of a different kind. The wall speaks in its own way as performance. As one viewer observed: it makes you want to fall like water.



During the making of the work time stood still, gave me sustenance. I once or twice collapsed on the other side of the big gallery room and gazed at what I was doing, what I had done. If I could pause in this making, deliberate on each stroke, each letter and word, each marked-up crossing out, make the making of this work the making and remaking of everything I longed for between us, surely, surely it would give me breath enough to keep writing ‘a presence of *that* place on *this* earth’, as Brophy writes (2011; his italics). Surely, it would show it mattered.

It was in these small moments of looking, of thinking, of feeling and longing, of yearning, that the work came together, took shape. All the separate parts coalesced so that I could no longer see differences, single histories, my dilemmas and questions and hesitations, and the construction of threads plaited together. No. Now, it was a work that spoke for itself as a single cloth.



It was in the doing and making of the work (and now in the writing about this writing post-exhibition long after the walls of the exhibition and display and all those words have been painted over, disappeared) that I realised I achieved something quite fantastic (as in *phantazein* or ‘make visible’ (Harper 2001–2011)), something made in the spirit of Jeanette Winterson writing about the power of poetry in her most recent book *Why be happy when you could be normal?* and what I am now calling my very own strange poetry:

It isn't a hiding place. It is a finding place (Winterson, 2011: 40).

*Images: 1–2 by author, 3–8 by Kukame McKenzie, 9 by L. Bufardeci, 10 by Kay Abude, 11 by Martina Copley.*

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