

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

An experiment in collaborative writing: day ten

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Many hands have helped author The Conversation's first collaborative writing experiment.
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We're starting 2015 with an experiment in collaborative creative writing. What happens when you ask ten academics to write a story together? Taking our cue from the Exquisite Cadaver game played by Surrealist artists and poets in the 1930s, we've asked our authors to contribute to a story in progress. We gave them free rein: no restrictions on style or genre. Just file 300 words that continues the story.

Marguerite Johnson, a classicist, gamely volunteered to start the experiment, followed by novelist Claire Corbett, creative writing lecturer Donna Hancox and digital cultures researcher Chris Rodley. Our literature columnist Michelle Smith came next, then theatre director Julian Meyrick and creative writing scholars Nike Sulway and Dallas Baker. Chapter nine was from novelist Camilla Nelson and today's final instalment is from creative writing lecturer Jane Messer.

One

The exquisite corpse floated. The golden head bobbed as the water moved beneath it. Blood seeped from its chest.

The exquisite corpse was a man minutes ago. He had swum with his mate. Bathed in the heat. Caressed by the coolness. Blessed by the gods.

He stared at it. Naked and without its dog tags. The body never looked as beautiful alive as it did dead.

The exquisite corpse is composed. Adjective, noun, verb, adverb. Bloody body sinks swiftly. Adjective, noun, verb, adverb. Corrupted corpse falls fast. Sonnets printed. Songs penned. And cut-up scraps. To

make sense of the senseless.

The exquisite corpse was foreseen by the blind bard. Blasted amid the catastrophes on Troy's plains. Once past. Once future. He knew of the man who screamed to the heavens and shook the earth. He warned of his return. He knew of the man who now held the cadaver and kissed its lips.

The exquisite corpse began to sink. Air in the lungs gave way to water. It rolled. Faced the sand. Looked blindly for the portal on the ocean floor. That which leads to Hades.

The exquisite corpse is bathed in moonlight, glorious. The ghosts of corpses past and present swim up to greet him. Surrounded now by thousands like him. Death, in glory and in vain.

Perpetual cycles of bloodshed. Act one: one hero mourns, keening and wailing through the night. Act two: another returns to the trenches.

Keep calm and carry on.

The exquisite corpse drifts out to sea with the dawn. Mourning waits. Waits for the news to be told in a faraway land. Tea and sympathy in the kitchen. Tears at the six o'clock swill.

The exquisite corpse becomes iconic. Progeny from faraway come in droves. They pour regenerative ales to cleanse the earth. To honour the fallen. To claim the land and proclaim to all: "The exquisite corpse shall drink new wine".

First instalment by Marguerite Johnson.

Two

But my task is not to be dazzled by the exquisite corpse.

My task is not to be drunk on new wine or old ale.

My task is to search the steep sandstone under the white sun. My task is to explore the trenches, to find tin plates here and bayonets there.

My task is to swim the green waters, to duck my head under and see what he saw, what they all saw on the other side of the world, that moment of peace under the transparent skin, pierced by shells fizzing down into the gloom, the crump and thud of high energy explosives muffled by the weight of sea.

My task, like the blind bard's, is to sing, Muse, of the rage of Achilles. But who is this Achilles? This new Achilles, the one we never knew. My task is to find him, to reconstruct all that his exquisite corpse cannot tell me. To find the objects and possessions that speak louder than his drifting naked body: uniform, rifle, knife, a letter from a sweetheart, a sister, a mother, a souvenir, a naughty postcard, a tile of hard biscuit. Sing, Muse, tell us what these objects say. Make me a singer for the Dead.

There is a thing that does not fit. I am looking for that object. This photograph. This newspaper clipping with the headline: Pathetic Domestic Tragedy.

Enlistment papers that say: Hair: Gold. Eyes: Brown. Complexion: Half-caste.

And in that parcel of possessions sent home, among the handkerchiefs and letters: four books. One is the Bible. Three are not. I turn them over, rub the sand and dirt away from their jackets. What are their titles? What did they mean to him, three he brought from Westralia, one souvenired from Egypt?

Shall I tell his story, the story of one man?

Second instalment by Claire Corbett.

Three

The book outlived him, they always do.

It is given by a woman, really a girl, with faraway eyes and a sharp wit. They both know she will not wait for him. In a corner of a crowded office she is already forgetting him while she hands over a book poems by W B Yeats. The possibility of them, however, is in the pages of the book that is wrapped in brown paper smudged with sweat from her hands. The first time they'd spoken, in the lunchroom after weeks of smiles and heavy glances, she rested one of those hands on his arm. Firmly and for a long moment. Anchoring him finally and it seemed that perhaps he'd found someone. But that hope is gone now. The present slipping immediately into a memory, with only the book remaining to tell their story.

This boy on borrowed time. Who both knows and can not know that death hums around him already while receiving cards and well wishes on his last day at work before shipping out to fight in a country he didn't know existed six months before. To fight for a country that barely acknowledges him but is happy for him to die for it. His corpse hovering like a shadow behind him, getting ready, as he stands uncertainly in the middle of an office watching a girl and a life that may have made him happy for while sway away. Only the heft of the book in his hands feeling real.

He flicks through the pages, line after line blurring into each other until he see the words:

A shape with lion body and the head of a man

A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun.

The future opens up before him like a gaping hole.

Third instalment by Donna Hancox.

Four

The next book in the neat pile, after the Bible and the volume of Yeats, is *Stories from Herodotus* by Rev. Alfred J. Church (author of *Stories from Homer*, &c.). Pasted on the flyleaf is a bookplate with an inscription that reads "Prize for Good Conduct and General Proficiency". He did not, strictly speaking, deserve to win, for although his Conduct was typically Good, his General Proficiency was not at the standard of two or three of the others, and for this reason he is visibly surprised when his name is called. But after all the boy has suffered, the master thinks to himself, he deserves some encouragement.

Years later, he passes his old pupil walking down Adelaide Terrace and his face breaks with joy at the recognition. They go to a tea room and share a currant cake as the boy, his past ordeals gone like presents on Christmas morning, tells him the book is his proudest possession, and that, despite his aversion to the classics, he has read it from cover to cover, many times.

"It's coming with me to the front," he says, and quotes Dienekes' boast of how, if the Medes blotted out the sun with their arrows, he would merrily fight in the shade. The master joins his game of dressing up the new war in the clothes of old ones, and they speak of Marathon and Miletus and the flight of Artabazus until the cake is finished and it's time to wipe his moustache and wish him well on his glorious adventure. And in his bunk on the ship, the boy reads of how "great reward is, in general, gained by the running of great risks" and smiles, not knowing that Herodotus, the Father of Lies, was wrong about most things, and especially wrong about this.

Fourth instalment by Chris Rodley.

Five

The final book was a gift from his mother. She had slipped coins from his father's trouser pocket for months, burying them in her dresser drawer, behind costume jewellery that she never had the occasion to wear. It was a volume of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales illustrated with sombre watercolours. He knew that he ought to be more taken with boys' adventures, but he wanted to relive the tragedies of the steadfast tin soldier and the little mermaid through repeated readings. The gilt on the cover and spine had been almost entirely worn away by his clutching hands. He knew what it was to have a heart torn between two worlds but to belong to neither.

She had not said a word, but his mother was terrified that he had enlisted. She stared at the steaming kettle, focused on pouring the boiling water into the cups with determination, and then lost herself in the darkening liquid as the tea steeped. He explained that it would be good for him. It would be important for more men like him to contribute. A nod implied that she agreed it probably would be. But she really did need to clean out the pantry at some point, as she was having real trouble finding the packet of biscuits he liked.

He had asked her for a handkerchief and she gave him one of the embroidered kind she insisted was "too good" to use. It had been tainted by the stale lavender sachets that she had placed cheerfully in the drawers as a newlywed. If he pushed his nose right up to the centre fold where he'd kept the

memento – part-way through the Snow Queen – he could smell her in the pages of the book. He made sure that none of the other blokes saw.

Fifth instalment by Michelle Smith.

Six

Later, in recovery, his head full of marble, the word that takes hold of him with a fierce, inhuman heat is: back. Memory seizes up, and finding the threads of how he used to feel, when he used to feel, is a slow chipping through dull rock. Outwards, on the transport, it was a different story, the Age of Lark, peppering postcards from a foreign port reeking of ancientness.

“Water is china blue, bumboats everywhere as we disembark for nnnnnnn.” “What an adventure. Talk is we may not be going to nnnnnnn after all.” “Missing home already! Say hello to Francis and the twins”. This irenic period is unimaginably short, later simply unimaginable.

He buys: a new watch with a dark green face; a leather wallet that has pockets too small to keep anything in really; an embroidered sleeve which fits his bible nicely. He slips it into his breast pocket, where it sits awkwardly, but he feels it is the right thing to do. Later, he takes it out and fits his finger down to the first knuckle into the perfect hole punched through the cover. Around the edges is a smear of char so delicate it might have been painted by a master.

He frowns, tunnelling back through unending blankness. Hard to believe he has a past. No postcards now, thanks. He regards the bible with an appraising eye. Swiftly, and for the first time, he opens it to the page where the sharpshooter met his match. He reads: “Riches profit not in the day of wrath: but righteousness delivereth from death. The righteousness of the perfect shall direct his way: but the wicked shall fall by his own wickedness”.

“Which one am I?” he wonders. He spreads his two hands before him, like a man contemplating a difficult dance step. But in truth he knows he does not care.

Sixth instalment by Julian Meyrick.

Seven

Those books. To be constantly misunderstood as a paper man; a thing made almost entirely of the stories he carried with him. To be always cut and pasted. Rearranged from the parts of other stories.

His mother’s stolen coins would have been put to better use bribing someone to keep him alive. Or placed beneath his tongue to pay his way across the river to where the dead wait.

Better to have been lion-headed Donestre than Dienekes, and spoken with strangers in their own tongues. Walked together on some Alexandrian frontier. And then to have consumed each companion, limb by limb, until only their head remained.

To have taken his severed head into my arms, in my post-prandial splendour, and wept.

The problem with the dead is that they know nothing. They have forgotten everything, even themselves. Even the ones who died in a war, or a siege, or their lover's arms. Who were eaten by cancer or went mad.

The problem with the dead is that they are not. You cannot speak with them. They do not listen, let alone converse. A corpse is to the lost beloved as a spoon is to the sun. You can say five thousand times to the dead: Come back, I love you. But they do not exist; they cannot hear.

Standing here, in the shade of a tree (no arrows blot out the sun in Queensland), it is only my loss that hovers, waiting to be felt. It is only my grief that insists that he (that we) should be remembered.

I may be dead when you read this. Or I may be caught, as he is now, in the space between being alive and being dead. No matter. If I am dead, then I am no longer mourning him, or you, or myself, or any of the others.

Seventh instalment by Nike Sulway.

Eight

How to tell this boy's story? How to give him back his name?

We are separated by death and distance, he and I. Me, here in my comfortable life in Queensland, and him, well, who knows where he is now, if he exists anywhere at all. He is just a silence to me. He is in the place where I am heading, the place of forgetting. In remembering him, I hope not to die into that place, where I will go unremembered. But, who is he?

My only evidence: the body and a pile of possessions left on the shore.

On the body are two wounds, both in the chest. One healed, but the scar, right over the heart, is not the white of an old wound, but pink. It had happened only weeks before death. So the boy had spent time in recovery, perhaps in a military hospital close to the front? The second wound, fatal, is like a flower blooming in the boy's chest, its petals flaps of skin, its roots plunging deep into the boy's ribcage and puncturing his lungs.

The boy's possessions were abandoned at the high water mark when the two men went in to swim, one of them to return, the other to bleed out into the cove, making a red eddy of his life that, heavier than the water around it, sank in spirals to the sandy bottom. Among the possessions, four books and a pile of clothes.

The clothes are standard issue. The dog tags missing, perhaps sunk to the bottom of the cove, or possibly taken by the other man. The one who left a bloody fingerprint on the book of fairy tales, right on the first page of *The Little Mermaid*.

Why, after watching his mate die, hit in the chest by a random shell, had he come out of the water and handled that book, possibly taken the dog tags, definitely ripped the boy's name tags out of his clothes. (There was a smudge of blood on the inside collar of the boy's shirt, where a fragment of the name tag remained.)

Inside the books: an old movie ticket in the collection of poems; in the Stories of Herodotus the calling card of a teacher from Perth; and in the book of fairy tales two things – a handkerchief and an empty envelope. The name on the envelope, presumably the boy's, is unreadable, smudged, either by rain or the tide. It was hand-delivered, there's no stamp or address, but there is another smudge of blood on the back, where the letter writer's name is clearly written: Jack. Next to the name is a childish drawn mermaid with a love heart pierced by an arrow. Is this a reference to *The Little Mermaid*?

The second swimmer had removed the letter, but why? What did it reveal? Why rip the boy's name from his clothes? And what of the mermaid with the pierced heart? An unusual thing for one soldier to draw on a letter to another. Isn't *The Little Mermaid* a story of forbidden love?

Eighth instalment by Dallas Baker.

Nine

I tore the page off the printer. Crumbled it, tossed the ball into the growing pile in the waste paper basket under my desk. This story was never going to work.

It was clear that I needed a new protagonist. Somebody edgy and urban – a woman named Violet with red lips and jet-black hair cut into a blunt bob.

Violet who lived large, talked big. Violet, who liked to drink; who was not the solution, but part of the problem.

I could also bring the story closer to home. Set it right here, in subtropical Queensland. Or maybe back then (in those days) when everybody was big on panic buttons, gated communities and car alarms, when men in white shoes made pots of money in cocaine and real estate. Back then (before real-time broadcast and reality television) when you never really knew.

The corpse would no longer be a military cadaver, but a maker of Big Pharma – or else, a manufacturer of plastic; a creator of deadly toxins.

They found his body on the first Tuesday in May. It came floating down the river on the day after the Brisbane floods.

They thought at first that he'd been swept off the riverbank and washed up downstream with the rest of the debris. A piece of broken pipe was caught in his trousers, with a length of garden hose. He smelled of fish.

He carried no identification, except a set of dog tags that were far too old to have belonged to him. He

had a copy of the Histories of Herodotus in his pocket (or maybe, Hans Christian Anderson's The Little Mermaid with a thumbprint of blood). His Rolex watch was still ticking.

It was Violet who noticed that he wore white shoes.

I woke up my computer. Finally – I really thought this could work. I started writing, “Narrative Writing, Assignment One”.

Ninth instalment by Camilla Nelson.

Ten

Hi Camilla,

Thanks for submitting this assignment on behalf of your writing group. Prof. Kroll has asked me to peer review the marking for reasons of transparency and overall workload management. Apologies for getting this feedback to you a day late: I have had some urgent student matters to do with enrolment to attend to.

Could I raise a minor point before moving into the substance of my feedback: there seems to have been a mistake during the upload process to Grade Book, as the last line reads “Narrative Writing: Assignment One”, and it should be included on page one as the heading with the correct assignment title, “Narrative Writing: Collaboration One”.

Your group has been very fortunate to have had an articulate and independent focus audience, with more than a dozen responses and interactions. A couple of the other collaborative writing groups working at other journal sites have received no response at all, other than from stooges who I know to be friends of the student contributors.

The group has grappled well with the theme of war and death, and the waste of life – particularly of the young male soldier – who staggers through the text, dying, brought to life again for the next section, then wounded and dying again in a terrible refrain. Nevertheless, for Collaboration Two, the extension assignment, I'd suggest the group expands on the character of Violet and the contemporary urban Brisbane setting. Is she a soldier? The theme of water brought out in the first section and maintained throughout really finds strong focus in the latter sections set in Queensland: here there were hints that the narrative would engage with national issues relating to rising sea levels and Australia's defence force being utilised in emergency coastal reparations.

You will probably have discerned for yourselves, based on the responses from your focus audience, that the more lyrical and associative sections have been the least compelling. The principal issue raised by the focus audience group is for a stronger narrative thread, and less repetition in the first four or five sections. I'd suggest considering working with those poetic strengths but also defining the key narrative earlier in order that the work doesn't only “sparkle” on a line by line basis, but as a narrative whole.

Though not specifically identified by the focus audience, those same sections are loosely in the genre of “historical narrative” and freely utilise classical allusions to historical texts and myths; even the reference to “white shoes” is reaching back some decades. With books and literature less and less studied in our universities, you’ll find fewer readers familiar with the classics and mythical references. Consider your audience: how often do you expect them to be using Wikipedia?

The narrative steadily shifts to a more contemporary time and setting, and from Europe to Australia: from ancient wars (for e.g. Troy), to references to Shakespeare (“the bard”), through to what could be world war one (or earlier – references to “bayonets”) and world war two with the references to “trenches”, the mother’s lavender sachets, and forward again to what might be the Iraq war with mention of the film, Snow Queen (released in 2002?). This is a vast span of time and events to cover in a few thousand words: very ambitious for a group working on a short collaborative fiction.

The image of the white shoes, which I mentioned above: is it too obscure a reference to the era of Joh Bjelke Petersen, former premier of Queensland and his cronies? Clearly located, regionally-focused writing can speak to universal themes that cross readers’ cultural boundaries (think for instance, of E. Annie Proulx’s Wyoming stories). However, could the group explore ways to open these elements out to readers who may not be familiar with the original events and personalities? Remember, your focus audience is national and international and believe it or not, many of these readers are less than 50 years old.

I look forward to reading the next iteration of this narrative – or if the group chooses to, an entirely new theme - in Collaboration Two.

The group’s and individual grades are available for download from Grade Book, along with the detailed rubric mapping.

Marker: Jane Messer

Tenth and final instalment by Jane Messer.

 Fiction Creative writing Creativity series 

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