

SUSAN DIAB

PROJECT TIME-TRAVEL

Reflections on Learning by Revisiting Childhood School Projects

INTRODUCTION

I stood at the foot of the mountain. It looked steep but as it was the first time I had climbed, I was quite confident. On the top of the mountain, from down here, I could just see Dinas Bran castle (our target).

Well, I started on my climb, the first lap was easy just a level piece of ground. The sun was hot and we were dying for a drink. Walking on, the path was rougher. It was very steep now. And the stones kept slipping under my shoes.

By now Mr Vinton and most of the boys had reached the top but I was only halfway. Then we had to start coming down again. Unfortunately, I did not see the ruins, but I'd had good fun. (school project: 'A Journey To Conway 1975')¹

Taking far too long to sort through papers left in my old bedroom in my Mum's house last summer, following her death, I was drawn into reading passages and looking at drawings made in some of my old school projects. It felt as if there might be answers there, somewhere, to questions I had yet to formulate. The opportunity to write a chapter considering how changes, transitions and transformations have informed the teacher I am now came at just this juncture. I am an artist with a first degree in Modern Languages and a second in Fine Art – Sculpture. 2016 marked my thirtieth year as a teacher in Higher Education, a personal jubilee giving me the chance to step back, take stock and reflect on a career that has a peculiar but no less fond, character of its own. There are so many routes I might have taken to consider how my own experiences of learning have influenced the teacher I am now. The main change I focus on here is growing itself, passing through childhood. I've deliberately left the 'up' out in 'growing up' because that signals an adult perspective and when looking back through these projects I was cast back into my childhood self without any need to see that condition as just a stage on the way to being older. 'London Folder by Susan Diab', 'A School Trip to Conway 1975', 'Unusual Musical Instruments', 'Creation: A Comparison of Darwin's Theory of Evolution with the Book of Genesis', 'Woman and Her Fight For Freedom', 'Aufenthalt in München, Sommer 1981' are the projects I revisit in the process of writing this. Sifting through the contents of my old bedroom, 'The Museum of Susan', pretty much untouched since I left it over thirty years ago, retrieving the project books and, since then, reviewing them and reflecting upon how I worked as a child, remembering how I felt when I was

SUSAN DIAB

putting them together, has offered a consoling validation. I have realized that much of what I am now I already was then.

By way of example: an image of a trilobite carefully drawn in pencil and labelled: 'Trilobite, The First Life Form'. On the facing page, an explanation:

About two and a half billion years ago, scientists think life began. It is not known how or where life started. It is very hard to imagine that out of the miles of water that covered our planet, life arose. Out of nowhere, maybe, small molecules joined together to form living organisms. The scientists know about what was living by the fossils they find under layers of age-old rocks. (school project: 'The Creation')

I know that what I feel for the trilobite is love. I love everything about it and that love began with the doing of that drawing. The shape of its body, segments joined together inbetween which I have carefully shaded in darker pencil to give them some dimensionality. I didn't understand it, I don't understand it now, but I love its shapes and that was enough to have created a life-long romance. I am become, as Alec suggests in his feedback, trilowoman, a Baradian entanglement². Three lobes: so appropriate for a project about projects, concerning past, present and future.

This present reflection navigates around and through the notion of the 'project' - up for question in its protective comfort-blanket of parentheses - because this offers a container that is deliberately provisional, tentative. Here, I am aiming to reflect on the nature of the 'project' in order to understand better the complex interplay of relationships between image, text, childhood, time, research and learning. Projects, by definition, inhabit different temporalities: they look back through processes of research, they take on a form and a purpose in the present and they look to the future. Experiencing a period of major transformation in my self whilst writing this chapter, life events, happening with a recognizable shape in the moment are given a voice and acknowledged as they continue to affect myself as artist-author-researcher throughout the editing process. Life's contents are never sufficiently tidied up to allow for a clean overview and events intervene, so feeling 'unready' is a part of this process. As such, the chapter itself is a 'project', which, though edited, retains diversions and asides intervening as and when they must. The chapter and its contents will remain up for grabs even once time and print have cast their essaying into some form of posterity.³

Michael Taussig's ruminations about keeping notebooks as an anthropologist have helped me to recognize in my childhood projects the transformative act of making visual (drawing) and of combining image and text as a way of making sense of research into a topic.⁴ Looking back over my own juvenile works has given me insights into how I teach, by bringing together my younger artist self with whom I am now, an older artist-teacher self, negotiating and encouraging the youthful creativity of my students. The writing of this chapter allows me to look back through my youthful projects with a view to understanding how what I did then and how I felt about it inform and direct how I teach and (continue to) learn now.

To draw is to apply pen to paper. But to draw is also to pull on some thread, pulling it out of its knotted tangle or skein, and we also speak of drawing water from a well. There is another meaning too, as when we say “I was drawn to him;” . . . Drawing is thus a depicting, a hauling, an unraveling, and being impelled toward something or somebody. I will be doing this twice over, first in my drawing and then, in what I have to say about it, drawing on my drawing. (Taussig, p. xii)

Life has thrown events at me over the past year which have threatened to stop me writing altogether but which have also given me the gifts of particular levels of openness that shockingly breath-taking difficulty tends to bestow. I am in a period of things breaking down; every time I try to write, it all just breaks down. During the past year I have been struggling to negotiate debilitating symptoms of menopause, my beloved husband has been diagnosed with Parkinson’s and in May 2016 my Mum died after a decade of suffering a long, slow deterioration with Alzheimer’s disease. Consequently, my sense of time has been altered: nothing is as it seemed before and all is up for re-invention. If I become conscious of how little I know I am struck dumb so all I have left is to venture out in the direction of trying to speak... I give you three sections: Part One The Project, offering ruminations on the nature of projects in order to set the context, Part Two The Museum of Grief, writing my way through grief for both past and anticipated events and Part Three, Duplicating Spirits, where readings of the school projects themselves bring to light inherent insights into what it is to learn, their relevance to teaching, hopefully, implicit.

These thoughts are for my students as much as they are for me. The neoliberal mood of the present would set us against our students as they advance on us in ever increasing numbers with their growing anxieties, needs and real-life concerns, like unstoppable armies intent on wrecking any vestiges of a research career and grading us for our efforts as they go. I reject this perverse encouragement to resent them even as we are supposed to be delivering them with an excellent ‘experience’ and put myself in their shoes on a daily basis, because they are me and I am them and we are all learning together.

* * *

Thinking-while-dancing on Saturday night; feeling wild and free. Somewhere amidst all the movement I imagine a kind of writing liberated from self-consciousness and purposeful function. A writing with no interest whatsoever in addressing some academic rubric, a dance fighting at every step and twitch to rebuff the suggestion that it be ‘for’ or ‘concerned with’ any kind of viewer.

When I know what that kind of writing is like, I will write it. For now, it’s only sensed, not yet visible or utterable. Pre-linguistic maybe or some kind of ‘chora’ but even to categorise it in that way is to subject it to institutionalised terminology.⁵

It was, is and will be wild and free. W&F.

SUSAN DIAB

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Interlude / 'between playing', Andalucia June 2016

In the night there struck up a great wind that set the shutters rattling and hauled us out of our deep sleep to see that everything was all right. The bushes and trees beyond the mesh of the mosquito guards were swaying wildly and the wind started to howl in that way it does when it swirls around a building, and which sounds so alarming in the middle of the night. The wind ripped me from an absorbing dream where fire was threatening destruction and soon the rain came too and when we staggered outside, naked, to fetch in cushions and parasol to stop them being blown away, I smelt the wet earth giving up its soul. "Earth, wind, air and fire", I thought, "all four elements in one night."

The next morning, the ground still wet, we took ourselves up the track to the awkward bend where the road gives out to one side. Along the track butterflies and tiny, exquisite, pink flowers, as well as a Morning Glory, gave up their faces and wings to us to admire. Underneath a small tree seemingly growing out of a rock, fallen juvenile pomegranates, unharvested and blackened by the sun, hardened into dark brown leathery nuggets begged to be picked up. As we walked by the ruin I stopped to imagine sitting there looking out across the valley at the view and sketching, the ruin's walls of red baked-clay bricks, crumbling, held together only by snakes' lairs and spiders' eggs. I said out loud "I'd like to sit here and sketch" but even as I said it I knew I never would.

PART ONE: THE PROJECT

Some years back I was working in a small team and referred to what we were making as a 'project' when one of my collaborators disapproved of the term saying they thought it was "a bit schooley". Thinking about that now, it seems a most suitable term. Was it not at school that I did my most passionate, most thoroughly researched, best thought-through projects? The 'project' has been theorized as an endeavour and applied as a concept to the grandest of schemes, from the Bechers' photographic archival documentation of industrial buildings to Habermas's analysis of the unfinished project of modernity.⁶

My method of writing and research is a 'bricolage' practice where the writing happens as and when it can, in the cracks amongst the various tasks of a teacher's working life.⁷ I am imagining having time to write this chapter, reflecting on possible connections between looking back through the projects and sorting through Mum's possessions. I begin thinking that maybe this fearful anticipation of not having enough time to write is part of the work, being overtaken as I am by the hugeness of the very thought of the task of clearing Mum's house. I begin to see connections in my mind between the act of dealing with her things and the writing and drawing of the projects. I am thinking about the task and the activity of making

a project: having an idea, researching it, collecting material, selecting which material to use, which images to make to 'go with' it and then, finally, how to organize it all and lay it out to make a book. The idea for a project looks to the future and its production; once written, its editing goes back to the past. Each then meets the other on its return trip: each is both and both is each. In their discussion of the temporality of the project, Gratton and Sheringham offer the following insights into the contradictions inhering in the very provisional nature of what it is to be a project:

the term 'project' may be used to describe a completed undertaking. But to apply the term in this retrospective way, . . . is necessarily to recognize the trace within the final product of the now past future and past present dimensions of the project. . . . A 'result' is above all a project when the process of accumulation can be seen constantly to jeopardise, even as it calls for, the moment of culmination.⁸

So, its end may be threatened but a project can extend back through time and simultaneously launch into the future.

To 'project' means 'to throw things forward'. I once saw a woman projectile vomit on a bus. She gets on, sits quite near the back on one of the raised seats and then, a few moments later just as the bus drives off very suddenly there is this horrendous noise of guts wrenching and a completely horizontal, orange, fluid jet shoots from the back of the bus to the front, catching several other passengers along the way. I am in awe of this event and it doesn't sicken me now to think of it, rather the striking thing about it was the strict horizontality of its path, as if she had marked out in advance with a spirit level a perfect 180° line through the air to then use as a guide in her retch.

I think of light projections I have made from a source onto objects on a wall. To project in this sense is to move forward through space, from one plane or point of light, to another. So, when, as a child, I made my 'projects', did I know that I was extending them into the future, to this point, now to be written about at a future date? Where at the time, did I think they were going? Where could I have envisaged them ending up? I was familiar with the idea that people collected things but had I really thought at all about objects being kept for posterity and then used as artefacts from which to understand something about the past? The young self talks to the older self constantly. Youth is always looking ahead: "what do you want to be when you grow up?" never "who are you now?". Fulfilment lies in the future, not in the present. Each project we make is a step towards another state where we will have become someone. Perhaps to be alive is to be engaged in that forward movement?

A project, you see, goes forwards and I would just keep coming up against this dead end. A dead end doesn't carry you on. You need something to keep you going. The outlook must bear some spark of hope or . . .

Or what?

Or the reader doesn't read on.

And if the reader doesn't want to, or can't read on, then the project is doomed.

SUSAN DIAB

Tuesday 28 June 2016 (5 days after the UK EU referendum): a project may be embarked upon in the direction of hope, betterment, improvement. As far as the notion and reality of 'Europe' is concerned, has it not been seen, since its inception, *as* a project, as the 'European project'? An endeavour that signifies an ongoing attempt made by different countries within an agreed union to live and work together? I have been a member and beneficiary of that 'project' for most of my life and to see it scuppered as a result of an ill-thought through referendum after 43 years feels heart-breaking. The UK's participation in this European 'project' destroyed by a right-wing press in league with privileged élites intent on covering up the real reasons for people's hardship (an austerity programme) whilst blaming any deficiencies in the economy on the presence of the EU and on 'immigrants'. The 'European project' is a project of hope, going in the direction of greater co-operation and collaboration and now the UK is intent on leaving it at a historical moment where extremely urgent issues such as climate change require more of a hands-on, joint approach than ever.

PART TWO: THE MUSEUM OF GRIEF

Frozen in time, until now the days of reckoning, of clearing out and sifting through. Frozen in time, until now the days of reckoning, of clearing out and sifting through. (deliberate repetition to denote inevitable return)

My Mum died. She died in May of this year, 2016, that is only four months ago. I am shocked that it is only four months since she died because it feels like much, much longer. This is partly because in that time I have been expected to do such a lot arising from her death. Clearing up after a parent's death is a job of work.

My Mum died. She died in May of this year, that is only four months ago. In that time I have been travelling backwards and forwards between her house, the house I mainly grew up in, tidying, cleaning, sorting, bagging up, taking to the tip, putting away, squabbling over, the many items of stuff that accumulated in her house over a lifetime. We've put the house on the market, the house I grew up in. We've let the estate agents in, men in suits, with their cameras, who've taken photos. They have put their photos onto a website for strangers to see in case they want to buy this house, the house I grew up in. We've been advised to put away 'personal effects' to stop them getting nicked by potential buyers and so that they can imagine their own personal effects in their place.

Wednesday 7 September 2016: struggling with two beasts, grief for Mum and menopause. Still having hot flushes and now the summer doesn't seem to want to die and its warmth continues and the sun is shining through my blinds and making me overheat every ten minutes or so. I long for the cool, dark grey of Autumn proper. Grief is treating me meanly. It sneaks up on me and catches me unawares so that I forget that it is grief which is affecting me and instead spend half of the energy I could be devoting to releasing some of the feelings, trying to work out why I feel so bad. Such profound heaviness: going up the stairs I am dragging ten sacks of coal after me and mostly I just want to lie down on the floor where I am, curl up and cry. A lack of concentration, difficulty focussing and applying myself

to anything really, loss of confidence and self-belief, increased feelings of vulnerability.

Many of those symptoms are the same as menopause but this throws in its weird fluctuations in temperature as well, with accompanying moments of despair. Hardly anything is written or known about menopause. If only I'd asked Mum about it while I had the chance...

Mum the Muse.

Mum the teacher of reading and writing.

Mum the literacy 'expert'.

What happens is this: I wind down towards a point of authenticity, a place of feeling. I am walking down towards a lakeside jetty. The water is dark and threatening. I am drawn to wade in tentatively but I resist and as I do so I start to feel what it would be like to be in that water: physical pain, emotional wreck, an end-point, a death-within-life.

Not going there – yet. I've read Joan Didion dealing with the aftermath of her husband's sudden death.⁹ A revelation, her ability to describe just enough detail to point to intensity of feeling together with her reminders that memory itself is unreliable: "not only have I always had trouble distinguishing between what happened and what merely might have happened, but I remain unconvinced that the distinction, for my purposes, matters."¹⁰

Lying on my desk is Carolyn Ellis's 'Final Negotiations', also about the loss of a husband, but I don't have the heart to read that one yet.

Screaming from the pit of my stomach, an intensity so sharp, this heated knife cuts through the air as through a million planes of thin sheet-ice. I tried to let my body go the way it wanted to go naturally, to let it change and bend and shift and enact a life alteration but in doing so it dragged me down with it.

The mentality of aesthetic modernity begins to take shape clearly with Baudelaire and with his theory of art ... This mentality is characterized by a set of attitudes which developed around a transformed consciousness of time. It is this consciousness that expresses itself in the spatial metaphor of the avant-garde – that is, an avant-garde that explores hitherto unknown territory, exposes itself to the risk of sudden and shocking encounters, conquers an as yet undetermined future, and must therefore find a path for itself in previously uncharted domains. But this forward orientation, this anticipation of an indefinite and contingent future, the cult of the New which accompanies it, all this actually signifies the glorification of a contemporariness that repeatedly gives birth to new and subjectively defined pasts. ... The new value, which is now accorded to the ephemeral, the momentary and the transitory, and the concomitant celebration of dynamism, expresses precisely the yearning for a lasting and immaculate present.¹¹

Yearning for a lasting and immaculate present – a refrain which echoes . . .

I was reading Taussig just now discussing a Mexican writer's relationship to his photograph of his late Mother.¹² It reminds me of Barthes's description of searching through photographs of his recently deceased Mother looking for one

SUSAN DIAB

which does her justice, as we say in English, one where he sees the Mother he can recognise. Taussig writes of the dog-eared photograph of the Mother having a hole where her heart was, - it must have been a large photograph – where a finger could fit through.

I am wondering about the connections between marveling at notebooks and projects and reflecting on Dead Mothers. On ‘One’s Dead Mother’ or ODM, for short. An acronym as anaesthetic, dulling the pain.

My Mum died only four months ago.

She died, she did.

I am writing to try to find out what I think and how I feel right now, how I’ve felt in the past four months, since she died. I’ve been waiting until I ‘felt better’ to write but of course I’m not about to feel better in the near future and I need to meet this dead-line.¹³ I have to meet this dead-line. I want to take part, to claim for myself the right to continue to participate even though I am devastated. Participation in devastation. Some years ago I was enrolled on a course at a university when my Grandmother died a couple of days before an essay was due in. The university regulations stated that I could have ‘a week’s extension to dead-line in the case of family bereavement’. I could see that a week on from receiving the news of her death I would not be feeling any more able to write the essay on the subject of cyberspace. So I decided not to delay but go ahead and write through the grief. I passed the assignment but the tutors were unable to grade my essay; my writing sat somewhere outside their marking criteria... The piece of writing was acknowledged to be ‘strange’.

Turn to face the strange.

Writing as an exploratory process. Joan Didion says that she writes in order to find out what she thinks and that’s the same for me.¹⁴ Writing helps me to untangle the feelings as well. Maybe it’s about sorting out the feelings from the thoughts, to see what the difference is between them?

PART THREE: DUPLICATING SPIRITS

The first page of my school project about our trip to Wales, typed, produced on a Banda machine or spirit duplicator, holds this promise written by my form teacher, Mr Vinton:

You may not think so now, but in many years’ time you will enjoy reading this book and showing it to your friends. So use it well and make it as interesting as you can. You will treasure this book for many years to come.

There follow pages of typed text with words left out; a foundation for us to complete with the palimpsest of our own discoveries. As I leaf through, a memory of a photograph from this trip comes to mind. Two of my friends at the time, Siobhan and Tracey, both ‘Bay City Rollers’ fans posing and pouting and waving their tartan scarves above their heads as if they are at a concert miming along to the songs. I was not a fan of the ‘Rollers’ and I recall that as I shot the photo I felt a

sharp pang where my part in their shared experience ought to have been. Siobhan went on to organize all the girls in our class to bully me as punishment for my academic achievements at school. It was not on for girls to do well academically and Siobhan, my former best friend was chief of policing this code. Eventually none of the girls in the class would speak to me and I was cast alone and adrift on the mercy of the boys who were seemingly unaware of my Pariah status and demonstrated acceptance, kindness even, towards me, letting me sit at their table. Paul W told me one day “when you grow up you could be a barmaid”, which I took as a huge compliment.

London Folder

A green cord binds the folder together but now only through one of the two punched holes. It drapes, or rather hangs, next to the folder like a strange, shriveled umbilical chord.

I notice in myself a kind of condescension towards my younger self yet also great levels of affection. I sense how much pride I must have taken in putting together this booklet, how it must have looked, when new, completed and handed in. I can summon that pride back up and think and feel myself into the younger me who was probably around 8 years old when I wrote this fairly straightforward account of the history and uses of the Tower of London. Below it a nice drawing of a crow goes with the last sentence: “There is a legend that if the ravens get killed or if they leave the tower, an evil will befall the whole of London.” A teacher has written ‘Good’ in red ink at the bottom of the page and her long tick reaches up through the last two lines of my text.

The Creation

Another project, is a comparison of the story of the Creation in the Bible with Darwin’s Theory of Evolution. The finished project gave me a sense that I was clever and this is the key to why this is such a significant piece of work, to me then and also to the adult person I am today. I know that there have been times in my life when I have held back from showing cleverness. Patriarchal society requires the female intellect to shrink somewhat to accommodate the space that is left for it. Looking at the project now, as it lies on my desk reminds me of a time in my life before I learnt to hold back. The project demonstrates a level of enjoyment of research and of discovery - difficult to find the right vocabulary here – it testifies to a delight in my own generation of ideas and an ambition of reach in calling on the Book of Genesis and Darwin’s writings as material to be analysed and ruminated upon.

I designed the cover inventively: a disk of images with a window cut into it which you can turn to show each day of the creation story. I still love it, it’s so ingenious and it was my own idea. The images were drawn and coloured-in using my water soluble Caran D’Ache pencils. You could stick the point of the pencil in

SUSAN DIAB

your mouth, transfer a blob of spittal to the page and paint with it by moving the tip of the pencil around. The colours are vibrant and the drawings confident. The cover is built to last, protected in sticky-backed plastic; I was making this project for posterity, that much is clear. And so neatly done. It's beautifully clean, with headings underlined, twice. The handwriting is big and confident and joined-up in parts. There is barely a blotch in the transcription of the First Book of Moses and the margin of every page bears a teacher's approving tick in pencil.

At this point I am moved to skip to the teacher's overall comment at the end of the project. 96% for the work and: "*Excellent. Brilliantly presented and clearly you understand it. Commended.*" Looking at it now I don't really understand why I didn't get 100%. I mean, what was wrong with it after all? Nada. It's beautiful. I now realize, looking through it and feeling so pleased with it, with myself, that this represents some sort of pinnacle of achievement in my life. Gosh, at aged, what? Age 12? What does that mean? What can I do with that? Through this revisiting of 'The Creation' (the project) I am enacting a kind of re-creation of my younger self. I am taking my current self to visit my younger self, writing becomes a means of time-travel that allows me to have conversations I have not previously dreamt of.

Leafing through a French project I notice how many illustrations I made to demonstrate language use. Homework to show an understanding of prepositions is an excuse to draw a range of objects *upon*, *underneath* and *next to* others. I get tremors of pleasure revisiting these drawings because I can recall how much I enjoyed doing them and how satisfied I was with their completion. I am rather astonished to see a picture I drew of a Monsieur Albert, boulanger, and a range of French patisserie each labelled with its specialist French name: 'bagnat', 'pain au levain', 'couronne tressée', 'natte ordinaire'. I am touched by my middle-class naiveté, my lack of understanding that it was precisely this careful attention to detail and my broad cultural knowledge gained from growing up in a house full of books against an impressive range of mixed European, West Asian and English influences, the characteristics of being me, which would bring me the most opprobrium and punishment from my more working-class 'chums': Next to a drawing of a sad looking rabbit with one drooping ear against an acid yellow background: 'Ce lapin a besoin d'un ami', *this rabbit needs a friend*.

I am good. I am good. I am so good. I am so so good. So, I am good. Good so I am. I am good. I am so good. Good good good good good good good good good ...

Don't look back.

I studied Ancient Greek for two years at secondary school, some real treasures here: pages of Greek I can't read now, written in beautifully formed script, the letters like pictograms, holding so much meaning, my fountain pen tracing the shapes as lovingly as the making of any drawing. A comic strip of Orpheus and Eurydice in the Underworld, with coloured illustrations showing the stages of their story, underneath, a summary in case the pictures hadn't conveyed the narrative adequately: 'Orpheus, a famous singer, lost his wife, she was killed by a snake bite on her ankle. He played his lyre and lulled the creatures of the Underworld. He asked Pluto and Persephone for his wife back. They gave her back to him on the

condition that he didn't look back at her. But, Orpheus looked back to make sure she was still there and Eurydice drifted back to the Underworld.' 'Back', 'back', 'back', over and over. . .

There is a feeling there, it is with me right now. Present. What is it? How can it be described? It's in the space between my body as it is now and my being as it was then. There is a time-space which is being bridged and it's awkward, this bridging because I'm not just flicking through the projects in order to be mildly amused by my childhood self, in that patronising way that is so usual when attempting to consider anything related to extreme youth. I'm trying to go straight from the feelings these old pages with their yellowish-brown sellotaped traces evoke in me to putting down words, words which might be meaningful to an understanding of teaching and learning. That is a tall order.¹⁵

Woman and Her Fight For Freedom

Capital letters cut out of card and stuck onto the cover of a green ring binder underneath more sticky-back plastic. Inside the cover I have written out a poem, unreferenced: 'The New Women: They dress like men/They talk like men/They live like men/They don't like men.'

A timeline of significant dates in the history of women's suffrage, then over the page written on the back in biro:

Tomorrow I've
got an 'O' level.
Tomorrow I end
history. The next day I take
German no.2 and then je
suis fini!

A kind of poem, a note written in class to a friend while the teacher is speaking and you're supposed to be silent.

Leafing through, leafing through.

Approaching overwhelming tiredness I could just close my eyes and be off. . . All those hours and hours of study emanating from the pages. All the anxiety, the fear of not doing well. There was a kind of self-imposed tyranny there, over myself. A holding of myself within a kind of strait-jacket of discipline. There I felt secure and safe from the danger of doing less than well. What was that danger, what shape did it have?

A fear of the withdrawal of love.

Now, in the present, I know there was no actual threat. I used the need for the perpetuation of love to motivate me to work so hard. So hard that my knees would ache from lack of movement after hours sat at my bedroom desk. This was not a childhood, it was a kind of prison. I interpreted the messages incorrectly. There is a hint of tragedy there. Or is it here? What was I trying to prove? What am I trying to

SUSAN DIAB

prove now? To prove, to rise, like warm dough? I was active all along but just waiting . . . for another day.

(IN)CONCLUSION: ENDINGS

What have I learnt about how I teach now from these travels back through time to my school projects? That there is much to be gained from allowing for the provisionality of projects: an openness that lets life (and death) in, that allows room to breathe and that does not assume that everything is moving forwards, always onwards but that time and directions change and alter. That decisions made when very young can be reviewed from an adult perspective and understood anew and changed. That the editing process never ends. That affections and attachments forged in youth can endure like fossils to last beyond the ends of time . . .

Recently, there has been an end-of-the-world feeling in the air, occasioned by the savagery of war, numerous atrocities, home-grown killings and murders, an increase in hate crimes, Donald Trump as US President (!). On a personal level, too, events have me thinking about – and feeling – a sense of endings. A youthful project looks to the future. A mid- to late- life reflection or review of such projects must struggle against a lived - felt? - sense of ends being real. End. Times. If we consider this idea of ‘end times’ in relation to ‘The Project’ then . . . where does this take us? If a ‘project’ is dedicated to the future, then, even considering the possibility of ‘end times’ is a negation of that, a cancelling out of the project. But a project also has an end, a completion point. I am not so focused as an adult as I was as a child. I was more concentrated then. I would finish things. I ‘see’ things. Artists do. I take a bit from here, add a bit from there and spend a while arranging them, either as physical material in the real world to make a picture, or in my mind. What I see, frequently, is the end of everything.

My fine art students submit for assessment a set of documentation of their work so that they may learn how to present a collection of ‘texts’ and images that ‘represents’ their work in its stead. The brief clearly states that this should be an ‘edited’ set of documentation yet always some of the students understand this brief better than others. Sometimes they submit documentation that tends towards the encyclopedic; they put all their notebooks, scrawled seminar notes and photocopied chunks of articles together in some kind of container and then give it all back to me. In some instances at least some of the text will have been highlighted by them but this is not always the case and sometimes, what is given back to me are the very passages I drew their attention to in the seminar.

For an assignment to be a forward-looking ‘project’ for it to re-new, it must have had selective, and organizing principles applied to it. Students must lay their hands on their material, make it their own through processes of reading, understanding, the raising of further questions, an attempt at analysis and the application of critical thought. However, sometimes re-productions come back, whereas what I have wanted is that processes of review inform and structure the editorial decisions they make about what to include and what to leave out.

For much of his working life my Dad was a trade delegate for British furniture. At the time one of our most popular exports was reproduction antique furniture that is, newly manufactured but made to look old, like a family heirloom. These particular British exports were increasingly popular abroad. Who knows just how many Japanese board rooms or upmarket dining chambers are graced with an English oak table which is actually only thirty years old but looks two hundred and thirty? What's missing in this reproduction, it seems to me, is a new interpretation, and, in my view, without that the project is moribund or bound towards death, deathward-bound.

All that teaching. All taught. All taut.

Air loom,
When the air weighs down
Suffocating

* * *

I sit in the wind with the waves at my feet and the breeze blows my hair about my face. I dissolve into the air and think myself into the water. I am fluid, I bend like a reed. I am free of tautness, constriction and fear, free of the control of others.

NOTES

- ¹ The school projects are a collection of folders I made as a schoolgirl on a range of topics as indicated in the text, which I have kept into adulthood.
- ² I am indebted to the insights given by Alec Grant into ideas of entanglement between the human and other material worlds, in this case Bronwyn Davies' article about 'Ethics and the new materialism', in particular what she calls the 'co-implication of humans with non-human matter' (Davies, p.2)
- ³ Andrew Sparkes's essay 'Autoethnography at the Will of the Body: Reflections on a Failure to Produce on Time' about the time needed for a 'yet-to-be-told story' to find its way to words is a central reference for my chapter in having encouraged me to write despite and through grief to meet a deadline.
- ⁴ See in particular Taussig chapter 4.
- ⁵ In the 1980s and early 1990s I concerned myself heavily with research into 'l'écriture féminine' as part of investigations into the work of the German poet Karoline von Günderode (1780-1806). From these readings I retained an interest in the notion of pre-linguistic (and hence pre-phallogocentric) feminine language but grew disillusioned with this and related theories once I had understood their essentialising nature.
- ⁶ Gratton in 'The Art of the Project' defines characteristics of the project as: attenuation in all its forms, delegation and collaboration, open-endedness, documentarism, and '*contraintes*' or 'restrictions, protocols, parameters, rules of engagement' (p.130).
- ⁷ For example Kincheloe (2016).
- ⁸ Gratton and Sheringham, p.18, introduction.
- ⁹ Didion (2012).
- ¹⁰ Didion (1968).
- ¹¹ Habermas (1997).
- ¹² Taussig, p.69.

SUSAN DIAB

- ¹³ I believed I could tell the story when it should be ready so that I could then craft it in written form as a chapter for this volume. In so doing, I forgot the 'will of the body' in the process which would not be rushed to reveal itself in symbolic form and on demand at a pre-specified point in time. Sparkes (2013) p.209.
- ¹⁴ I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. Didion in Popova (2012).
- ¹⁵ Sparkes points out the time needed for somatic experience to reach verbalisation e.g. his question: What are the consequences for the autoethnographic author of denying or by-passing these carnal ways of knowing? (p.210).

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