

THE FLIGHT OF THE MIND: WRITING AND THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION CONFERENCE PAPER

Foolscap

Lisa Gorton

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Like everyone here, as a child I had dreams that I could fly. The way that I flew then—my flight *in* the mind—serves as an image of how I have since managed flights of the mind. It is almost sad for me now to consider that in my dreams I didn't fling my arms wide and soar into blank air. Instead, from standing, I used to draw my knees to my chest and start a sort of stretched dogpaddle in air. I made hard work even of dream flying.

With that image of hard-work dream-flying in the back of my mind, in my background and character, I want to talk about two parts of inspiration: both the provocation to start a work and the strange force that compels the finishing of it. I'll make reference to three works: my novel for children, *Cloudland*, my poetry collection, *Press Release*, both written at the same time; and a more recent, uncollected sequence of poems about a weather instrument, called a Storm Glass.

It is intriguing to consider how far the circumstances in which we first dream up a work might influence the entire nature of it. Take *Cloudland*, for instance—a novel set almost entirely in the clouds. I first had the idea for *Cloudland* when I was seven-years-old, flying with my sister from Melbourne to Canberra. I still

remember looking out the plane window at a shining expanse of cloud and thinking, 'There ought to be a world up here'. That memory held for many years as an image in my mind.

If I think about those circumstances now, I can see parallels with *Cloudland*. That trip felt like an adventure to us; and *Cloudland* is, most simply, an adventure story for children. More fully, though, it is a meditation in narrative on the nature of clouds: their coldness, in forever changing, as well as their beauty. My sister and I were flying away from family complications, and I suppose the possibilities that I saw out that window were mixed for me with a sense of the impermanence of home. That kind of family uncertainty provides what you might call the emotional setting for the two children in *Cloudland*.

To an extent surprising to me now, the narrative in *Cloudland* draws out feelings held for me in that first image of clouds, framed by the window of a plane. That was the start of it. Yet I think something else compelled the finishing of it. I kept working on *Cloudland* for many years, alongside other projects, largely because of an interest in writing about clouds. Outside the mean, blue bareness of summer, every time I went outside and saw clouds I wanted to catch something of their various, wasted splendour.

Clouds are nature's baroque—overdone, fantastical and yet made inward by our language for melancholy; moods clouded, gloomy, overcast. I wanted to write a children's adventure story—typically, that most outward of forms—and have it work also with a kind of baroque inwardness, where the cloud settings themselves served as images of the children's states of mind. I wanted to write prose with the

tautness of a child's adventure story, and also with the density and charge of poetry.

From this distance, I can see that it was the impossibility of this enterprise that held my interest for so many years. So, although I do see that *Cloudland* is an almost embarrassingly flawed work, there was a lasting difficulty in the writing of it that endears it still to me. I think writing resembles that hard-work dream-flying, where any sense of freedom that we achieve through it comes from its difficulty. If you obsess enough over a piece of writing, it starts to work like a prism that holds and reflects all your experience back.

I have called this talk 'Foolscap', because I have read that foolscap paper takes its name from the watermark it once carried of a fool's cap and bells. That foolscap image also suggests for me the difference between the first inspiration to start a work and the compulsion to finish it: that first inspiration, like the cap and bells, watermarking every page: an impulse, or folly, then written and overwritten page by page, draft after draft.

Perhaps I could draw out that idea by describing the writing of two poems in *Press Release*. The first, 'Morphine', is an elegy for my feisty and indomitable grandmother, Ethleen King. This is a poem based, as the film credits would say, on a true story. My grandmother, who lived well into her nineties, maintained a blank horror of death which seems to me entirely justified, so it is a continuing sharp pain to all who loved her that she died in the night, in hospital, after a dose of morphine, alone.

Morphine

i.m. Ethleen King

i.

You're slumped in your lunch tray,
corn soup gunked in your new-curled hair,
spilling from the tray and *thop pthop-pthop*—
in clammy handshakes—
meeting itself distractedly on the floor.

There's a triangle of bread, one
corner bitten out of it, buttered to your cheek,
and your false teeth an inch from your mouth
as though we've sprung them *clack clackety-clicking*
into the soup in their imperturbable hunger.

ii.

The soup is smooth under our nails,
bland on our tongues, is everywhere—
until the nurse brings a towel
and smears you clean awake.

Then, out of that blank we had thought death,
you sit up and eye us coldly: 'I have no future.'

iii.

Say we are fires so lit with ourselves we burn bewilderedly

because the world is made of things indifferent to fire.

There we are ranged in chairs half-circling you

propped in that white bed winched too high—

a contraption of pulleys and levers the nurse works

with an adeptness like contempt—and we say nothing,

nothing, and leave at the end of visiting hours.

iv.

So call this a prayer for morphine:

that it soothed the sheet,

that it held your hands in the vein,

that its fingers were light

that drew you in, like a drawing-in of breath,

and did not let you go.

In truth, I only managed to write 'Morphine' because of a distance imported into the memory by writing about it first in prose, in an unpublished short story, as a memory belonging to one of the characters. The distance, even coldness, in that first part of the poem derives from that prose version.

So, in 'Morphine', the process of writing imposed a useful distance. This works by contrast with another poem in *Press Release*—its title poem, in fact; part of sequence called Sci-Fi. This poem is set in the future, in a time when we can put humans into hibernation. After quoting a spurious press release, it takes the voice of a mother whose child has been chosen to colonise a new planet.

Press Release

*To honour the Year of Perfected Vision, in 2020
the PDK-4 Corporation signed up its first
Hibernation Astronaut for the missile, 'After Life',
launching its Perpetual World campaign:
'Preserving Our Most Beautiful Offspring for the New Life on Titan ...'*

They chose my child. I visit him
daily in the tiled room. His naked skin
looks backed with ice. I see his heart
beat hourly on the screen. He is safe,
I know, for his will be an innocent world,
conquered in peace.

He does not breathe
more than once a heartbeat. My own
small breaths haunt the cold when I speak
into the audiofile they have contracted to play
across his light years on repeat. 'Don't be afraid,'
I say. 'Like a handshake, palm to palm,
a gentleman's agreement,
your heartbeat tenders you—Are you cold?
Listen, out of these bypassed years,
silence in your mouth, you will amass such—
Only to think of you, falling from your name for sky
in this astonishing vessel!

Press release, my darling,
and do not sorrow. Do not once sorrow.
If you will think of me, think only of these years
I held your unfailing present in my empty hands.'

In fact, 'Press Release' began with the reading of a shonky scientific article about the discovery of a hibernation gene in humans, called the PDK-4 gene. I was thinking at the same time about the effect of broken phrases. Altogether, this poem had a technical beginning. Only after I had written it—when I was reading it publicly, in fact, and almost started to cry—did I realise that it was in fact a poem for my first child. Apparently, I needed the dimensions of space and time to manoeuvre what I felt about him into the poem.

I suspect that most poems in *Press Release* could be traced back to this sort of conjunction of intimacy and distance. We have our experience, and we have our obsessions; these together make the complicated machinery of our first and continuing inspiration.

Page by page, for me the main difference between writing *Cloudland* and *Press Release* came from how differently poetry and prose relate to time. As I mentioned, I worked on these at the same time, at a time when time was my particular obsession. I was looking after my first child, still a baby. I used to push the pram until he fell asleep and then write in a café until he woke again. Of course, he grew much more quickly than either *Cloudland* or *Press Release*.

Because narrative establishes its own time, while I worked on *Cloudland*, I felt that I could enter the alternative time that its plot established. I did rewrite *Cloudland*, over and over. Still, with each rewrite, the mechanism of plot offered its own anxiety-ridden escapism. But when I worked on *Press Release*, I was typically desperate. I felt myself in combat with time, a combat which I now think brought almost a dramatic element to the poems. Of course, every poem needs its own first

inspiration, but I think that the experience of working on these poems against time, as it were, is in truth what holds the collection together.

I'll finish by reading from a sequence of poems about a Storm Glass, because in these the experience of writing has become their true material, if not their subject. A Storm Glass is an outdated instrument which foretells weather; the crystals that grow in it vary with electric change in the air.

These Storm Glass poems started with a commission for 'a winter poem'—a commission which came a few weeks after the birth of my second child. I decided to spend all the money I would get from that commission on one of these Storm Glasses, which I had seen perhaps a year before in the window of a modern curiosity shop. Over the next year, that Storm Glass became a defining image for me; perhaps because, in that noisy and fragmented time, it kept its own self-closed quietness. But the slowness, the repetition, the self-enclosure, also came to stand in my life for the experience of writing while caring for young children: waiting, holding phrases in the mind, watching children grow, and feeling always what writing time away from them cost.

A Description of the Storm Glass and Brief Guide to its Use in Forecasting

Weather

I.

A sealed dome of glass where crystals,
by an alchemy 'more precise than precision', unmake
and make still grottoes that recede
from its blue-doubled curves as if epitomes
of fantastical ambition—

A replica, it would embarrass
by the overconfidence of intention, except those crystals
in colours of obduracy, which is to say,
uncoloured, blank of eye, formalise the inwardness
of weather and contract

hemispheres of wind to a decorative instance:
a northerly forms in it 'leaves of fern or yew' and, by that version of tact
which gives volume to silence,
its crystals retreat from tempest into the vanishing point
of their dimension—

II.

In a Storm Glass crystals
with the exactness peculiar to foreboding make neural
flare shapes: ultrasound-

coloured threads cross-stitched with blank, as of sensation
excised and here, preserved in light.

It is tomorrow's weather
haunting a small room. Clouds, which hurry for no one,
which, amassing, betoken
that undifferentiated grudge some call ambition, here confide
motive without gesture

As if to say There is
another world. It is in this one, this sealed glass, structure
of feeling in place of thought
where images fold into images the way a child disappears
into the film in which she plays herself—

III.

Original of Snow Domes—
soundproof rooms of repeating weather, of figurines in
time-lapse flurries
of glitter rain—a Storm Glass, shaken, begins again its self-
assembling: workmanship of an almost

substanceless precision.

It is reinventing weather as a daydream. Only its double-
curved glass, which
builds in parallax, makes it more like an instrument of hauntings,
as if to say He gave

his whole life to become
his idea of himself. So, tireless and without the extravagance of
waves, a Storm Glass
amasses its precarious adornment, this needlework in quartz,
mistakeable for regret—

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*You can hear the full text of this paper at
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