

The Secret Life of Doors

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“The sound of a heartbeat: like the opening and closing of a door.”
Marty Rubin

*A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters in Creative Writing in
the Department of English Studies, University of the Western Cape.*

Supervisor: Prof. Kobus Moolman

Submitted: 01/09/2021

Citation convention used: MLA citation

Abstract

This mini-thesis explores the poetic journey toward the subconscious images of an individual's memory. It comprises a collection of 35 authentic poems and a reflective essay that examines the uncovering during the creative process. The project explores opposites and dualities of the mind-room and examines the concept of a hypothetical door as a mechanism to reveal archetypal patterns through memory.

The collection of poems is divided into five corresponding sections. Each section has its particular approach to disclose the observations of the mind-room. The first section explores memory from a deliberate distance. Structural regulation, descriptive focus on nature images and linguistic precision are prioritised in order to stabilise emotion. Section 2 emphasises the inner spaces of the mind-room. Disrupting of the image through disharmonious writing exposes more of the emotion. In sections 3 and 4 more specificity is applied to the disturbing emotions and exposure of the heart-room. The Vignettes of section 5 defy structural limitations and incorporate all the themes from the previous sections. The poetic image aligns with the emotion in this last section of the collection of poems.

The theme of my thesis resonates with my dissociative approach in the sense that it balances the flux between the opposites of emotions via the journey towards awareness. The creative journey of a set of poems is traced retrospectively through discussion of methodological challenges and inferences.

Key words

Shame, Abuse, Death, Memory, Emotion, Dissociative, Door, Room, Image.

Declaration

I, Marié Meyer, declare that *The Secret Life of Doors* is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.



01/09/2021

This thesis has been submitted to Turnitin and has been approved by the supervisor.

Dedication

Dedicated to my Father

Acknowledgements

Kobus Moolman, for the unparalleled and encouraging guidance.

Phil Smith, for the unwavering material support.

Elna de Beer, for reading and re-reading with a trained eye.

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After so many doors

~

DOOR 1

Chores

You start the day with a good cry.
Then seat yourself and pee.
Flush the cat's litter.
Erase the slumber from your eyes.
Empty the dustbin.
Scrub yesterday's scraps off the plates.
Gag down the dregs of wine.
Then you sit yourself down by the back door
and gulp down thick coffee.

Traces

i.

She collects her life
inside a mute drawer, days
no longer present.

ii.

Perhaps suggestion
needs too much effort; walking
on an ocean's thoughts.

iii.

The knife is blunt, skin
is thick and earth too solid
for disappearance.

iv.

Perhaps the shore is
silent before the storm strikes
godforsaken waves.

v.

Three hands are never
enough to cut the knotted
trail of memory.

The blackbird

has come to my garden
with an urgent persistence,
and replaced the hush of my daisies.

Storm

She puts on her eyes and tries to write.
The brush of the cat's tail reminds
her there is a raging storm outside.
It clasps a cage around the words.

She cannot cut
the stutter
from her gut.
The door is stuck.

Alarm

Slowly the body becomes aware of
aching, and your eyes refuse to see.

You grab the dreams from the night
and wrestle them into the day.

You shuffle muddled words
until they meet the horror

of the baby dressing paper dolls and
fixing the feathers of the dead bird and

cleaning her swollen navel in the bathtub
before wrapping her lifeline cord in foil.

Some survival hovers and a sinister
silence says the world died outside

like the day when your cousin's
soot-blackened hand said no one must know.

You try to capture what the body sees
before the eyes interpret the restless bed.

Broth

i

He puts the packet of instant soup with the beans and the barley in front of her on the black marble and suddenly the lights are very bright in the kitchen.

ii

He usually sings while cooking.

iii

Her spectacles have fatty deposits that interrupt the precision.

iv

The walls are screaming.

v

She swallows once. But still feels choked.

vi

Is there an easier way to remove pomegranate pips without crushing them?

vii

They are the colour of fresh blood.

Blackbird's song

When taking photos of birds
you have to sit mutely and wait
until they perch to sing.

When clipping wings of birds
you have to lock the doors
and clutch the flight feathers.

When taking photos of memories
you have to bleed the corners
until the heart cracks.

Tankas

Topic 1

When an olive tree
does not bear fruit in the fifth
year, it is a sign
to walk away. As with love
the fruit comes when forsaken

Topic 2

It's so quiet here
that even the falling leaves
become intruders
The surface of the river
rings out for steadying breath

DOOR 2

Snowdrop

The winter rain welcomes a white flower
winding away from the roots.

It will last today, perhaps
tomorrow too, but then the

withering will claim it back
to bottomless rot, back to frailty

and the waiting.

Burano

(a memory of Veneto)

I borrow the wind for a walk
with my delirium on a leash.
Eyes drowning into the beyond of
islet scatterings. Hands bound.
Past old women clothed in black
beside multi-coloured houses
to guide the fishermen back.
The only sounds the ones you said
inside my absent head.

Boat

He says he has stories to tell,
having traveled the world and
seen exotic places, lost his mouth
and found a blank sail in the process.

Perhaps some stories overlap, like
water lapping at the cracked hull,
and masts creak a language of their own
that only sailors have learnt to tell.

Bench

Forsaken engraved benches
follow me.

Are the lovers still present
in their absence?

Here Paul and Pearl shared
the ocean's jaded rush.

There Shaun and Sarah sat
and watched the falling sky

until their children were left
with only a breath.

Perhaps the sun sets to
say that we can only try
to keep the days alive

Shall I seat myself?
Shall I rather kneel,
or perhaps just leave?

I'm leaving this house

this house with the heavy door
and the two windows and triangle roof
and the garage beside the wall on the left
and the garden with one green tree,
like in the picture every child
draws on the first day of school,
before the teacher reads the unspoken
words between the bright pictures,
before the child learns how to
write what she does not feel.

I say to myself, do not ask questions
without wanting an answer,
but still I do.

I'm leaving this house.
It does not serve me anymore.

Not today

I will write a poem
about not today,
but not today.

I will take out the recycling
across the street
and sort the plastic
from the glass
and try not to touch
the garbage bins
with my sanitised hands,
but not today.

I will wake you
from your snoring
on the tattered sofa
in front of the blaring tv
about current affairs
and viruses
and global warming,
politics, protests and
destruction of the forest
by arsonists,
but not today.

Today I will let you sleep
so I can find the silence
to write about something
other than today.

Spilled milk

There is a basket
full of bottled memories
behind the blue bedroom door,
like the empty milk bottles of her childhood
that she used to carry to the rusty gate
beside the silence of the apprehensive
roses who were learning how not to die.

When she woke up in the morning
she would strain her ears
to hear the milkman's clanking
of the empty glass exchange
and in the time-lapse following
his footsteps on the gravel
she would run to collect
the red plastic basket in the cold,
and carefully open the first bottle foil top
so that it made a small symmetric hole
from her fingerprint,

because she knew when they cracked,
they would become useless
and the milk would be like
the unwanted gooseberry bush in the backyard
where her hollow father
always went to whistle alone.

She still collects the memories just to know
that her face had less weather on it then.

Moments

one.

There is a weightless comfort in not moving, hands holding what is lost for a moment longer. Until the shifting settles.

two.

What are the phases of love-spells?
When he stops stroking the curve of her thighs?
Or when she forgets smiling?

three.

He says he cannot eat the baby tomatoes. He hears the worms inside them. She watches the wriggling creatures emerge under taut skin.

four.

Through the window she gawks at him. Fingers snared on glass. He doesn't know this.

five.

The day time left she killed him in the snow she had never seen before. He was writing poetry on her breasts. The heart makes no noise when it cracks.

six.

Mother takes out her loaded gun and shoots across the room at everyone with her swollen tongue. Mother does not let her move.

DOOR 3

Room

Her teenage room had a fish bowl and a
vacant-eyed fish gulping for breath and
a drawer collecting memories and sighs.
There were books and spines and
words whispering to her muteness.

Her room had a bed that floated with open
legs while fists hung from the window panes.
There was only one photo on the desk,
a father with a heart gone wrong.

She was trying to say something
with a black ball in her mouth
and her hands tied up with barbed wire.

TELEGRAMS

PAPA IT RAINED I GOT A NEW BLACK UMBRELLA STOP

PAPA KITTY DIED STOP

PAPA I AM SAD MAMA CRIED IT IS COLD STOP

PAPA IT SNOWS I WROTE PAPA IN THE SNOW STOP

PAPA MAMA BOUGHT ME NEW SHOES RED TOO BIG STOP

PAPA ARE YOU WARM DO YOU HAVE SHOES LOVE STOP

PAPA MAMA CRIES ALL THE TIME DONT KNOW WHY STOP

PAPA LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE STOP

PAPA WHEN ARE YOU COMING BACK TO ME STOP

PAPA WHAT DO I DO WITH HALF OF ME STOP

PAPA TODAY IS QUIET ALL THE VOICES DIED LOVE STOP

PAPA THE HOUSE IS DARK LOVE STOP

PAPA MAMA TALKS TO AN EMPTY CHAIR STOP

PAPA I DONT WANT AN ABSENT LIFE STOP

PAPA MAMA TRIES TO SMILE WITH HER WOUNDED EYE STOP

PAPA WHY DO YOU NEVER ANSWER STOP

PAPA MAMA CRIED SHE SCREAMED AT THE SKY LOVE STOP

PAPA NO ONE LEFT AND NO ONE CAME STOP

PAPA DONT BE A MEMORY OF A MEMORY STOP

The green jersey

My father asks me to fetch his green jersey
with the moss stitch yarned in heavy knots,
and I fetch it for him and sit down
where he has shrunk into his green couch
to quietly watch the ocean.

He used to have hands that could ball a fist
at the demons at my door, but now
his gnarled fingers clutch a bony knee.

We watch the ocean's pulse
from inside the safety of his room,
my clenched hand on his blemished hand, and I wonder
how many layers a knife will have to penetrate
to find the blood I have been bearing too long.

My father sits knotted on his couch
and stares out of the window,
no more fists to show his care.

I leave his hand cupped on his knee
and slowly close the door behind me.

Piano

My mother's fingers used to assault the
piano keys. They were fixed on semitone
pitch, forcing the instrument to listen.

I chose to sit by her feet,
and watch her vexed heels
trap and release the pedals.

The pedals were my hands,
longing for only a whisper
before her fists pronounced judgement.

Secrets

I remember how we used to build homes by
draping sheets and pegs over chairs,
playing parent-parent discreetly
and pretending it was allowed.

How we used to hush the water
rippling on exposed skin,
pretending the room was filled
with unfamiliar breathing.

And how we used to create
something from nothing.
The whole of life
already framed in a box.

Stare

My mother's eyes wore red lace.
Like a ripple in a weave that
refutes attempts to conform.

When her eyes blinked,
they frightened me away
like a fly sensing a lizard's stare,
behind the nictitating membrane.

DOOR 4

Terminate

She is preoccupied with death but
the doctors persuade her not to be.
Knife wounds bleed. If the knife is
sharp enough to penetrate the layers
of flesh. And then it leaves a mess.
It also reeks after a few days. If
she gets found. Drowning takes time.
And what if the ocean spits her out or
if the water does not freeze her breath.
Gas requires a planned effort. Whether
it's with the oven or the exhaust pipe
in the dark garage, the risk of failure
always remains. Swallowing a handful of
pills? She doesn't know. Yet. Jumping
from a building gives too much time
to reconsider after it's too late. The
noose is too romanticised and leaves
a bloated expression behind. Guns are
difficult to get and have too many
portals of entry. The mouth, the fold
where the neck holds up the chin, the temples
or straight into the third eye that
detects too much. And then the risk of
missing the artery remains. A planned
vehicle accident? Or a pedestrian accident?
Any form of movement on impact? A tactical
method of an accident may always backfire.
Sleep. And never again open the eyes.
Like her son said when she asked him how
he sleeps so much and he replied that
he just keeps his eyes closed. Just sleep.
And pretend not to wake up. And if it fails,
run the bath water and fetch the toaster.

Roses

Red roses in a vase drag
my eyes into the bath.
They sigh under my skin.

My hands undo my wounds, detach
the shame under the skin, detach
your scent where thorns now burn.

Every rose reminds me of burning hands
in that bath, in that cold house where
you once told me I had the softest skin.
Gravity cannot pull me in deep
enough from the water's beating.
I sit with the silence of roses

staining the colour of blood
where thighs used to be soft.
The thorns leave salty lesions.

Paper thin

I wrote a poem about how you undressed my thighs
but didn't see the cuts that made me feel alive.
I crumpled up the paper, threw it in the bin and
stared vacantly where the weight of words spilled.
I took it out and forced it flat again, left it there.

I wrote a poem about your fingerless hands,
wandering pointlessly across my breasts until they
stiffened in the coldness of your bed that
was too big for me and too small for us.
The poem found the waste paper bin as well.

I took the flattened and crumpled poems
written in blood, waited until dark, then
stacked a fire in the gloomy backyard

and hurled my words into the seething flames.
You said it was sacrilege, I called it absolution
while I watched the paper corners turn and blacken.

now

she closes the door.
she wants to call someone.
but pours a glass of wine instead.
she unshackles her shoes and unbuttons her blouse.
she breathes out.

she wants to call someone but sinks instead.
she sinks to where the gurgling floodgates of
the choir of voices who trap the thoughts
but never drown them, always meet her breath.

now she sinks into the voices who call her.
now she stares at their sounds.
sinking inside herself.

The day after I killed myself

The day after I killed myself,
the neighbour still kissed his wife on the cheek before he left for work, your car still had the smell of spilled milk on the back seat from the day when all my questions arrived, mother still sat solidly in her chair with the new crochet pattern she tried to copy, the baker on the corner of the next street still closed his doors at noon and motionlessly stared at the sky, the blue and white delft your mother inherited still glared at me from behind the locked glass panels of the cabinet I never wanted.

The day after I killed myself,
the clock which father brought home from the place we never asked about still ticked the seconds like mother's anxious breath, the silent cavalier still laughed behind his curled moustache and elaborate costume with his belittling gaze, the bathtub still collected messages, the entrance hall was still dormant, the rats still whispered, the house was still dark, and the bathroom clammy and the toilet seat still stained.

The day after I killed myself,
you still walked with someone else's feet leaning against the wind, the other women still floated in the gloom, the showerhead was still high enough for the way your shoulders were shaking, the hands still scratched at the flesh under a flaking skin, the skeletons still hung from the trees in the driveway, no one left and no one came, and the wounded eye was still me behind the door.

The day after I killed myself,
I left the bed on the pavement, like a whore.

Blood, blades & Jesus

Too much blood was lost.

When they stitched my skin Jesus was in the room
and the nails through his palms leaked no blood.
Outside the snow collapsed on the building that
looked like a forgotten Russian prison.

This morning I felt like a forgotten prisoner,
while trying to avoid looking at the undone skin.
Now Jesus mutely hangs his head on the white wall
of this room and the leaves of the tree outside

remain knife blades.

VIGNETTES

1. blood

she walks away from the sun and a mother's blood, closes the door that heaves like a broken breath chained to locked legs. she is afraid that after father showed her how to bother an ant-lion by disrupting its funnel the blood of her womanhood would mute her innocence with its strong smell. she knows that is why they look at her that way. a smell that always lingers on her bruised lips after father left the room where mother kept elaborate hats with matching gloves and a black velvet cape. she listened from her room to the pounding rhythm and stared at eyes falling on her from the patterned ceiling. now she walks into the backyard next to the graveyard of rusted vehicles where the dogs are waiting to sniff between her legs before she can unlock her legs and run away. and never return.

2. things father used to do

father used to hook her feet on his and waltz, father used to sprint around the house with her inside the wheelbarrow while they dissolved in laughter, father used to pull her loose tooth with a string and a smile, father used to let her sit on his lap and cry in his arms, father used to calm her down when mother didn't love enough, father used to soothe her broken arm with his vinegar muti and then kiss the sour wounds, father used to remove the bee's stinger without injecting more venom and then rub the swelling with butter, father used to have tea with her in her furnished doll's house, father used to wake her up to listen to hedgehog quills whispering in the leaves, father used to say that toktokkie was knocking for his beloved who never opened the door, father used to work in the back garden by the garbage bin where no one could interrupt his thoughts.

3. hollows

she closes her eyes and sees the hollowness spiralling towards a central point. she does not touch it. his sleeping back is breathing rhythmically on the other side. it reminds her of the hollow blackness between mother and father in their oversized bed. she used to feel her way through the cold corridor to find solace from her nightmares with them. her fingers were too scared to touch the encroaching walls for fear of being sucked into them. in the bed mother allowed her to replace the hollow but then turned her back towards her. father stroked her hair and eyes until she fell asleep again and then mother used to tell her to return to her bed with her back still turned. then she had to feel the corridor again to find her bed that covered another hollow underneath. in the silence she stared at the hollowness of the knotty pine patterns on the ceiling with her closed eyes. they followed the dark figures on the wood that were spiralling like Sufi dancers wearing black circled skirts and as she moved between them they spun in opposite directions and her hands got lost in the rhythm of their maze. in the morning their footprints remained ingrained in the wood and in the corner of her room the black cat blinked its green eyes only once before it ran through the open door with its tail erect. so the hollow blackness always finds her even before she does. it has long blades for fingers and it spins like roots that lost their soil while chasing her shadow in the darkness of the hollowness. if only she could find the door at the end of the hollow spiral that is nudging his breathing back, she knows that all the childhood hollows would fill the void and she could lock the solid steel door and sleep.

4. layering onions

Kook en Geniet was her second recipe book when she was a young wife in the remoteness of a Karoo farm where everyone spoke 'suiwer Afrikaans'. she always remembers the words 'dop die buitenste droë skilletjies van die ui af' when she slices onions. her first recipe book had comic strip illustrations and hardly any words, to inspire any young cook. she even attempted to make fudge because she worshipped her older sister who gave the book to her. but years later her sword-tongued mother-in-law thought it was a better idea to initiate her abilities with the help of Stoffelina Johanna Adriana de Villiers after her first attempt at Roast Lamb failed to meet her in-law standard. her own mother fried her eggs perfectly. she could even separate the runny white from the yellow yolk flawlessly for her baking but she never taught her daughter how to fry an egg. so the maturation process was left to SJA de V who guided her safely through the 'droë skilletjies' to recipe-perfect 'frikadelle' and better-than-packet-recipe rice. she could never understand why she was told to remove the onion's outer skin when it was obviously dried beyond tasting so she made bright yellow Bobotie once and added the skins for her mother-in-law, who quietly removed each one onto her neatly laid side plate aligned to the left on the starched white linen tablecloth and refused to say anything again. eventually she stopped trying and enjoyed the wine-while-cooking more than the cooking itself. now she cooks Risotto, reads the recipe in 'Italiano', listens to Pavarotti while cooking and sings along loudly while flapping her bare arms.

5. the house

the bedroom doors were always shut. her children behind one door and Grandmother behind the other. behind this door Grandmother breathed her throttled rhythm. she spent whole days in the dark bed that was balanced on bricks. her bunioned feet forgot the rows of vintage heeled shoes. pastel pink and green curlers lay abandoned. forgotten hair was caught in open mouthed hair clips. she displayed the pills beside the inherited cheap finery and powder bottle. she powdered her dimples but refused to powder her nose. the curtains were always drawn. beside the bed her bleak tea with sliced lemon went cold. grinning dentures stared from the murky glass. her hair was always flattened on the right side of her head. she watched the door with her back turned towards life behind the window. the sun was shaded away behind heavy curtains. her thin lips were pursed shut unless screaming into Grandfather's guava coloured ears when he forgot to empty her bedpan, or after he made her pregnant again. there was a hushed gun by the side of her bed. and the only movement was the rattling chain by the window, with the silenced dog at the end. father did not know this when he met mother.

FIN

After so many doors

(with a nudge to Anne Sexton)

i have made it this far

and the wretched past keeps
speaking of what might have been

but never was.

~

Reflective Essay: *The Secret Life of Doors*

“The man who comes back through the Door in the Wall will never be quite the same as the man who went out. He will be wiser but less sure, happier but less self-satisfied, humbler in acknowledging his ignorance yet better equipped to understand the relationship of words to things, of systematic reasoning to the unfathomable mystery which it tries, forever vainly, to comprehend.” (Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*:

<https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/23668205-the-doors-of-perception>)

I have always had a fascination with spaces, whether it was a room in a man-made structure or a contained space inside a natural structure. The worlds and thoughts that rooms contain have intrigued me since childhood. I gave my thesis the title *The Secret Life of Doors* because I believe that doors symbolise the gateway to the stories that rooms hold. They create the boundary between knowing and not knowing. They become a portal between the seen and the unseen. They are the life-force between opposites.

The aim of my project was to improve upon my creative writing techniques. I write in order to communicate and to express myself. Poetry became my language of choice by which my images revealed underlying emotions. Through my writing I tried to show the essence of a room inside the mind and how a door becomes the mechanism to understand the emotion contained within. A person is able to associate or dissociate with the contents of the room by managing the door. So I essentially journeyed towards the unconscious memory of that room in the mind. I would see an image or observe a moment I considered writing about and through free-association I would find the invisible door to describe that image. The doors to some of these moments opened easily and produced an image without much effort. Other doors took days to enter and some had to be aborted purely because I forced the image too much. Now I understand that poetry sometimes surprises the poet and the poem sometimes almost writes itself. Hence the words beyond the door often found me before I could turn the key to unlock it.

I aimed to create a narrative of images that release the underlying emotions of opposites: association versus dissociation, emotion versus non-emotion, confusion versus clarity and being the victim versus being the spectator. The underlying emotions were mostly shame, loss and abuse. I described uncomfortable moments because the intensity of emotion can be seen in the discomfort of the honesty that the true image portrays.

During the initial phase of the course I applied a strict poetic structure and form to my writing. The purpose was to control my writing by focusing on the image instead of explaining the emotion to the reader. I chose Tanka and Haiku poetic forms that imply a strict adherence to rhythm, strict syllabic use, and contain images of nature to evoke an emotion. The focus on nature also forced me away from an overly emotional attachment to my writing.

During the final phase of the course some of the poems became less intense. Vignette 2 about Father ('things father used to do') mostly covers light-hearted memories, and 'layering onions' has a jesting tone of voice. I further imbued this vignette with strong adjective use, while Afrikaans and Italian words sifted into the English narrative alongside a use of compound words: "recipe-perfect" and "wine-while-cooking". In this way I was able to introduce a flippancy to the heaviness of the emotion. These two vignettes are flanked by the other three pieces with their themes of desolation. I deliberately placed them within these thematic boundaries of distress to demonstrate the entrapment of light-heartedness.

My writing journey has been strongly influenced by Confessional poets like Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. The writing course, however, challenged me and shifted my focus away from the confessional genre towards an object driven approach. To achieve this I used a technique of discomfort while describing the image. I created uncomfortable spaces with specific words and images. In the poem 'Moments', for example, the reader may be distressed by a sense of doom associated with the speaker's significant others:

three.

He cannot eat the baby tomatoes. He hears the worms inside them. She watches the wriggling creatures emerge under taut skin.

five.

The day time left she killed him in the snow she had never seen before. He was writing poetry on her breasts. The heart makes no noise when it cracks.

six.

Mother takes out her loaded gun and shoots across the room at everyone with her swollen tongue. Mother does not let her move.

In 'Alarm' I ascribed the horror of the disruption of innocence to the object in stanzas four and five:

of the baby dressing paper dolls and
fixing the feathers of the dead bird and

cleaning her swollen navel in the bathtub
before wrapping her lifeline cord in foil.

I also had to learn to simplify my language and content. Instead of trying to write poetically, I attempted a more conversational style towards the end of my thesis. The poem 'Terminate' is the best example of this. It relays the trail of thoughts associated with suicide. In this way I tried to release the emotional impact of the words spontaneously.

I focused on precision: the process of finding the exact word that relays the emotion was a big challenge at the beginning of the course. Reading the work of Ocean Vuong was a very useful guide to slow my writing down, to be more mindful of the precision of the chosen word and to implement more simplicity. The last stanza of ‘Secrets’ initially read: “The whole of life / already framed”. In the final version, I added the words, “in a box”, to give more precision to the image.

I also had to apply structural devices to stabilise the emotional aspect of my work. Within the constraints of the Tanka and Haiku forms I was limited to syllabic count, theme, metaphor use and the pivotal turning of the image, highlighted as below:

When an olive tree
does not bear fruit in the fifth
year, it’s a sign
to walk away. As with love
the fruit comes when forsaken.

Here the turn in the poem shows the transition from the image to the personal response to the image. This technique contributed to the distancing from excessive emotion that helped me as a poet.

With this deliberate structural controlling of my writing style, I managed to shift away from voicing the emotion to rather revealing it through an image or object. This process was guided by my extensive reading of poets who successfully evoke emotion through image like Ocean Vuong, Sharon Olds, Alejandra Pizarnik, Ada Limón, Federico García Lorca and Paul Celan. Ada Limon’s poem ‘Sharks in the Rivers’, shares my focus on the history and emotion behind a door.

I cannot tell anymore when a door opens or closes
I can only hear the frame saying, Walk through
...
I want to walk through this doorway
but without all those ghosts on the edge,
I want them to stay there.
I want them to go on without me.

I want them to burn in the water.
(2010: 7)

Paul Celan inspired me with his precise eloquence in almost every poem of his, for example in his poem ‘Below’:

Led home into oblivion
the sociable talk of

our slow eyes
(1990:113)

And Ocean Vuong in his poem ‘Kissing in Vietnamese’:

My grandmother kisses
as if bombs are bursting in the backyard
...
My grandmother kisses as if history
never ended, as if somewhere
a body is still
falling apart.
(2014: <https://poets.org/poem/kissing-vietnamese>)

Apart from the precision of his words, the alliteration of the letter ‘b’ in line two enhances the auditory element. The absolute precision of word choice and the linguistic simplicity that provoke such a powerful emotion is merely described through the image. I strived to implement this technique more in my own writing. The art of this young Vietnamese poet has influenced my work immensely over the past few years. Vuong’s semi-autobiographical debut novel *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) is a treasure of poetic prose: “I am writing you from inside a body that used to be yours. Which is to say, I am writing as a son” (10). The eloquence and to-the-point simplicity make this statement extremely powerful.

During the challenge of narrowing my writing down to specificity, I had to learn to use sparse language with minimal explanation. I had to learn to write as I would speak, and to try writing less obviously poetically. Some of my work was too vague because I focused on abstract nouns. So when I shifted to a concrete noun, the image was finally able to speak for itself. I also had to adjust my use of punctuation and capitalisation, and to rather create pauses with rhythm and lineation.

The influence of the poets mentioned earlier helped steer my development from purely confessional writing to a more image-focused technique. The common thematic elements that my work finds with theirs are abuse, neglect, death and memory. My last poem, ‘After So Many Doors’, was inspired by Anne Sexton’s poem ‘Locked Doors’:

... However , there is a locked room up there
with an iron door that can’t be opened.
It has all your bad dreams in it
It is hell.
Some say the devil locks the door
from the inside.
Some say the angels lock it
from the outside

The people inside have no water
and are never allowed to touch.
They crack like macadam.
They are mute
They do not cry help
except inside
where their hearts are covered with grubs.

I would like to unlock that door,
turn the rusty key
and hold each fallen one in my arms
but I cannot, I cannot.
I can only sit here on earth
at my place at the table.
(1977:36)

My echo of the voices she describes and also the helpless despair is evident:

i have made it this far

and the wretched past keeps
speaking of what might have been

but never was.

In my work I have also contemplated the writer's ability to write without being influenced by his or her history, archetypal patterns, significant others or influential events. In his book, *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard argues, "But the unconscious cannot be civilised" (41). In an attempt to elicit this distancing from memory, I focused on creating poems about nature ('Snowdrop', 'Blackbird's song') and by purely describing the image. However, I still found that the subconscious emotion filtered through strongly and I had to apply strict poetic guidance to manage this. Bachelard summarises the personal connection with doors and memories so well: "How concrete everything becomes in the world of the spirit when an object, a mere door, can give images of hesitation, temptation, desire, security, welcome and respect. If one were to give an account of all the doors one has closed and opened, of all the doors one would like to re-open, one would have to tell the story of one's entire life" (239).

My supervisor Kobus Moolman has been instrumental in making me aware of the power of the image, and he gave useful insights into the power of disharmonious writing. His words, "How do you put the unspeakable into the speakable?" (Moolman, 2020) have been my guide. This process of reflecting opposites has been a firm writing guide for me. I tried to oppose the concepts of self

versus non-self and cluttered thoughts versus silence in order to align a dissociative character with dissociative poetry.

Through this process of dissociation I took the image and imposed an emotion onto the object and then described the image with a layering of words. I gave the silence a sound. The process was similar to how an artist takes a blank canvas and starts adding brushstrokes to show the object's truth and at the same time to reveal the artist's inner state. The more layering I applied, the more it 'disrupted' the image, slowly revealing the underlying emotion. The layering process transformed my writing from dissociation into an understanding of the image that I, as the artist, can associate with. In this way it became an alignment of the creator and the emotion.

In the poem, 'Roses', every stanza shows another layer of action of the roses: first they drag the eyes, then their thorns burn, they remind, then become silent and finally the thorns leave lesions. In 'Room' the objects become layered with noise as the image develops. I used words like 'gulping', 'sighs', 'whispering' and 'muteness' to layer over the forced silence:

She was trying to say something
with a black ball in her mouth
and her hands tied up with barbed wire.

I was thus able to move deeper into the uncomfortable spaces by 'disrupting' and 'layering' the image to reveal the underlying emotion. I distanced myself from the image, looked at it from an outsider's perspective and allowed the subconscious emotion to speak for itself. In this way I was able to find my own unique poetic voice that aligns with my dissociative character.

My writing project started as a journey from the inside outwards, and ended as a journey from the outside inwards – toward the emotion. Originally the aim of my studies was to find a means to communicate from the mind-room to the outer world. But the journey presented itself to me from the outside towards the inner room of emotion. The paradox is that I first had to distance myself from emotion in order to move more fully toward it, and to allow it to express itself objectively. The whole course was thus a process of flux between the opposites of emotion and non-emotion. This becomes apparent through the different sections in my collection. In Section 1 (Door 1) I applied a deliberate distancing to dissociate from the emotion. The deliberate discipline of structural writing (second or third person narration, strict poetic structure and natural imagery) encouraged the process of distancing in my writing. The two 'Blackbird' poems demonstrate this well. The poet is standing on the outside and observing an image that merely implies an emotion, leaving it open for the reader. This distancing from emotion also happens in 'Broth' and 'Traces' where the fragment and Haiku forms contain the emotion, as if inside a room. The poem 'Chores' keeps the poet away from the feeling with its staccato style one liner phrases and leaves everything to the reader's interpretation.

The blackbird

has come to my garden
with an urgent persistence
and replaced the hush of my daisies.

The synoptically oversimplified and minimalistic one sentence poem leaves the reader with more than one option of interpretation. The word ‘hush’ has many connotations. Even the title may leave the reader in a state of ambiguity: does the bird symbolise a poet or merely a bird?

In ‘Chores’ I attempted the same. The poem consists of nine mundane statements loaded with innuendo, for example: ‘gag down the dregs of wine.’ Once again, the meaning is open to the reader’s personal interpretation. The poem itself merely paints an image that many readers may relate to.

In Section 2 (Door 2) I ventured more towards the inner spaces by describing a little more than the image itself. The poems are mostly written in the first person in this section. The narrative poem ‘Spilled Milk’ contains an explosion of emotion after the image is introduced in the first three lines, and then restrained again in the final stanza. I made use of sensory descriptive words like ‘strain’, ‘clanking’, ‘footsteps’, ‘run’, and ‘cracked’ to enhance this explosive effect:

she would strain her ears
to hear the milkman’s clanking
of the empty glass exchange
and in the time-lapse following
his footsteps on the gravel
she would run to collect
the red plastic basket in the cold,
and carefully open the first bottle foil top
so that it made a symmetric hole
from her fingerprint,

because she knew when they cracked,
they would become useless.

From this point in the collection the poems develop towards more specificity that portray disturbing emotions and involve significant others like the mother, father and absent lover. The child-parent interaction becomes the primary focus of Door 3 in Section 3. The images portray emotional turmoil and disturbance. In ‘Piano’ the first person narrator finds her childhood presence diminished by the image of an overpowering mother figure. I still employed structural discipline in this section to contain the emotion and find some distance from the inner room. In the poem ‘Telegrams’ I

followed a strict word count, no punctuation and capitalisation in the official telegram style, yet the poem is still laden with emotional suggestion.

The penultimate section of Door 4 moves inward to the poet's heart-room. The focus remains on the meeting between the self and the emotion. I tried to recreate the despair that has had to be contained for a long time. The opening of this door was left for last. The secrets surface and are exposed vividly. The repetition of lines like 'the day after I killed myself' echo the speaker's urgency to express herself and find association.

I had Virginia Woolf's stream of consciousness technique in mind while creating 'Terminate'. It resulted in a poem where not much editing happened apart from eliminating unnecessary words and applying linguistic refinement. The original outpouring remained the dominant structure. 'Terminate' does not follow any structural constraint but merely presents itself as a trail of thoughts. Lines run over and words are not trimmed down to the bare essentials. I tried to create a description of the speaker's mind which is ultimately an intangible object that overflows with chaotic emotion. So the fusion of the image and the emotion, which were previously deliberately separated, finally happen in this poem.

The movement towards the inner room culminates in the vignettes of Section 5. Anne Carson's verse-novel, *Autobiography of Red* (1999) challenged my sense of traditional verse. This work was the main influence behind the final vignettes of my thesis. I tried to mimic her fusion of free verse and prose within the limitations of the poetic genre. I call it my poetic purge. I also admire her unconventional writing style and found it liberating to write the short vignettes where I was able to relay a trail of thought without structural boundaries apart from maintaining an appropriate word count. I wrote the five vignettes towards the end of my course and managed to write them more effortlessly. I wanted to maintain the simplicity of merely relaying personal memories in narrative style, once again leaving the interpretation up to the reader. The five vignettes incorporate the themes from all the other sections. I mention the parents, absent lovers, images of significant spaces and nature, and fuse all the images and emotions together. I tried to create a section that stands separately from the rest of the project in order to express the sense of liberation once all the doors have been opened, the secrets exposed and all thoughts expressed.

In retrospect, I ironically emerged from what Huxley calls "the unfathomable mystery" with more confusion than clarity. I found that the poet's personal journey and the creation of a collection of poems for a creative writing thesis were impossible to keep apart. The process of remembering was sometimes influenced by the notion of distortion. When emotions about a specific memory change, the person can close the door and move towards or away from the memory, and so the emotional memory eventually changes shape. In this way a door can become either a barrier or a gateway between the opposites of truth and non-truth in any memory. Understanding this process is thus a result of the fine observation of objects and symbols, just like the symbolism of our dreams can be interpreted to explain unconscious fears. Although I was "better equipped to understand the

relationship of words to things” (Huxley) the confusion of reality and non-reality fused into a dissociative inner process of creation. I hope I have painted a promising image with my poems.

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