

The rooms we build: poems of place and memory.

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Abstract

The rooms we build is my Master's thesis in creative writing. My thesis consists of two parts. The first part is a semi-autobiographical collection of poems, prose poems and short fiction pieces entitled "Letters to ourselves". The second part is a reflexive essay entitled "The rooms we build", that briefly examines mental health, memory and place as forms of connection and disconnection, with specific reference to my creative component. In my creative component, "Letters to ourselves", I use an epistolary form to express the breakdown of human relationships as a result of a lack of communication. The idea and process of letter writing, seen through the form of this collection, is intended to analyse the effects of catharsis on grief, loss of communication and mental health. A deconstruction of relationships through memory and loss becomes the main focal point. Overall, this collection seeks to understand the human condition and how catharsis found in letter writing can be a way of expressing memory. The importance of this is traced through three characters; a mother, a daughter and a lover. These characters do not speak directly to each other; instead they write letters to themselves and never send them. This is their way of understanding the events that occur in the poems.

Key words

Mental illness, memory, relationships, place, Durban, letters, catharsis, place

Declaration

I, Caitlin Dyer (Montgomery), declare that

“*The rooms we build: poems of place and memory*” 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.



Date: 10 February 2022

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

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Letters to ourselves

“Vita nostra brevis est, Brevi finietur”

“Our life is brief; it will shortly end...”

The Oxford Dictionary defines “ourselves” as:

“OURSELF” (OURSELVES PL.):

1. Used as the object of a verb or preposition when this is the same as the subject of the clause and the subject is the speaker and one or more other people are considered together.
2. We or us personally (used to emphasize the speaker and one or more other people considered together).

* Note: When we write letters, we speak without talking, but convey a sense of what we want to say to the other person. Usually, we get our point across better. What helps is when we write as if we are talking ourselves to the other person.

** Note: When we write letters unsent, we are writing letters to ourselves. Like shouting under water... Only we can hear it.

PART ONE

Letters from my parents

Date: 10 September 1992 – Until death

Place: 47 Manor Road, Hilton. 3245 (childhood home)

Letter 1: You were born screaming shards of sunlight

You walked quietly through this life. Footprints like a moth in the snow. When you were born you were born screaming shards of sunlight. Like a flower fluorescing in the dark. But you grew old before your time. Like a snarled bonsai. You whetted your appetite for a life you would never know. So, here are our letters to you, things that lie on our chest, not said. Like stones rattling in the ocean.

I can still remember the creak in the kitchen floorboard, the one your father forgot to replace. It always gave you away, my little cookie thief. You were always hungry. Snacking through the bread. The butter. The Jam. All the delicious things we could afford to buy you. When your father had his job. While you still lived at home.

Letter 3: We tried to conceive in the bedroom at 47 Manor Road, Hilton

A cage small.

Single wires big enough for your father's hands.

Sit in my abdomen.

Holding the foetus, he planted there.

Our ragged bodies in a field of absence.

I tried for years to conceive.

Letter 4: We eventually conceived you while camping at Hazelmere Dam

I have a bell jar longing for an atrium of orchids

My womb

A small seed planted in a barren waste land

But your father came and sewed one thumb at a time

And an orchid eventually took and grew wild up the walls of the glass

Bursting at the bottom, pushing out

You grew bigger

However, the orchid turned flowerless and leafless

Blood on the sheet in my bed, the orchid had been too confined and

Was unable to be sustained, the bell jar was too small

You had come too early

But we survived and you were born small

Shoebox-sized

Letter 5: Remember when your dad took you to the ocean?

Small bones tucked in. I want to lay you down. Sand in your hair

Water around the rocks

What went through your mind? I want to know

You were splashed by the sea. I want to rub lotion your skin. Johnson's Baby Lotion soft

Sand around the rocks

Did it hurt for a fleeting moment? I want to know

You, with sand in your eye. I want to kiss you. Forehead newly formed round

Rocks around the rocks

How deep did the rope dig into your skin? I want to know

You, sleeping amongst the rock. I want to cover you. Small towel too big

Shells around the rocks

Could even the maggots not eat you? I want to know

You, whimpering quietly. I want to hold you. Toe cut bleeding.

Even as a child you did not cry.

Letter 6: Umkomaas Christmas day 2001, Dad took you to the ocean, he always took you to the
ocean

Chapped

Lips after sun

Bright like copper coins left

In a gutter along a district road

Near Umkomaas.

Like your touch, small, a breeze, gentle calling

To your daddy, a tiny voice like falling

Leaves. Winter is coming to you

A song played and forgotten

Like a mouse in a wall after Rattex

Stench seeping through but your

Smell is not stench it is memory that ebbs

Waves around my feet. Remember the time

You used to laugh at the beach in the sun?

I had forgotten your sunscreen

So you had chapped lips, a small smile, bright eyes like copper coins.

God was too small for your breast pocket, so you left your Pocket Bible on the table.

I wonder how many people it took to bring you down from the old tree. Did they even bother?

It has been days now and I have watched time bleed from the sun and pool around my feet.

I haven't been able to find my home. I think I'm two blocks away.

Damn it! I should have forced you to take it.

Letter 8: Why could you never talk to me?

We watched you carve your arms to match the bark of the oak tree outside your bedroom window that shed its leaves in winter when you were at your worst. We cleaned up blood by the towel full from the bathroom floor it dammed like the Koi pond we built in the summer of 2019 at 306 Blackburn. We hoped the fish would give you purpose. Your body was easy to identify you had drawn the map of your nightmares across your body. You never told us of the wolves chasing you in your sleep behind your eyes around corners. Words we supposed could not form clear enough for you to cry out unless it was not help you wanted. Before we buried you we counted your body in stitch marks to check that perhaps you weren't still alive somewhere.

Letter 9: Remember when you were a child?

Remember when you were a child? Growing up in the old house? The big one? Where the floorboards in the kitchen creaked? At 2am you would sneak into the pantry to grab a cookie? Or the early nights you'd fallen asleep on the couch? I was there to tuck you in when you were ill, do you remember?

Remember when you were a child? Growing up on the farm in the holidays? Christmas on the *plaas* in the Karoo? With the donkeys that brayed at night? And the jackals that fought in the early morning when you ran to the outdoor loo? Where I would hold your hand while you pointed out succulents, do you remember?

Remember when you were a child? Studying at the Christian school down the road? Where you sang hymns before the national anthem? And you'd cry in the bathroom after failing maths? But you flourished in English class and Geography? And I would come cheer you at sports games, do you remember?

Remember when you were a child? Growing up seemed so slow? You chomped at the bit? To be tall enough for the rollercoaster? When the only stress was having to bath before bed? Where brushing your teeth was the only chore? And I would give you an allowance to clean, do you remember?

Time eats itself out of your hands.

Look. There lies sleep on your fingertips falling

Into nothing. Dust is shaken from the sheets in your house.

They found your body in the garden. You looked heavier than you were

As your bones settled into our arms.

Letter 11: As your mother, where did I go wrong?

We held hands like a red scarf wrapped in a dead tree Too tight to unravel You were my child
borne for 9 months The time it took to build the apartment your father bought off plan in Toti
To love you too much like I was God, something sacred, was that my mistake? I forgot to
teach you how to love How to fly like swallows escaping winter You were too fragile You
were too precious Or you were too tired Tell me Tell me
Where did I go wrong?

PART TWO

Letters to my lover

Date: 23 September 2016 – 5 February 2020

Place: 207 Marine Drive, Point Waterfront, Durban, 4001

66 Machusla Drive, Durban North, 4001

40 Tenth Avenue, Morningside, Durban 4001

(We moved around a bit. Was it you, or was it I, who was unable to settle?)

You came into my life like a deep gag rolling through my lungs.

We threw words at each other like paper balls.

But at night we lay close embraced like an envelope.

You were lightning through my brittle bones, so fierce.

I sat helpless watching the butterflies swarm around you.

We grew like roots into each other.

We became our stillness in the end.

If only I could write to you once more.

To write to you words that you called love and let them flow like a rain down rocks

To write to you that word called passion screaming in my chest like a bird

To write to you a letter of love to have it choked out like soil in my throat

To write to you about how dry and lifeless my heart is like a leaf in autumn stepped on

To write to you about the car we left in the rust yard the day we ran out of petrol

To write to you feelings of rage like an animal snared in the forest

To write to you about dreams we shared in the tent in that Free State winter

To write to you a memory like fog in the morning over the Bluff in autumn

To write to you sentences that called out our names loudly like waves in a canyon

To write to you

To write to me

To write letters to ourselves in order to breathe in the fresh air like the forest does in spring

To write to write to write

The leaves turned red and then brown. They fell like eyelashes. And suddenly it was snowing. White ground. Grey trees still clinging to little dry leaves.

That was the month when the moths flew thick. Their little bodies stuck to the outside lights like stamps. Eventually they burned off and fell into little piles of ash that blew away with the wind.

That was around the time I dreamed you had hallowed bones. That if they were to be buried beneath the mountains, they would make the stones cry out.

I woke up to find you sitting at the window.

That was the week the garden died. The Japanese Cherry stood bored and naked. The bird bath remained empty. There was no green. Just white and grey and little dry leaves. It snowed too early.

That was the autumn you left. You had told me you were leaving. But not when. I phoned to tell you I had found a leaf covered in ice. I wanted to show you how it resembled the veins on the tips of your fingers. But you told me you had already left.

That was the autumn I rearranged my bedroom and bought curtains and sheets and pillow slips all in white. And kept moths. In a jar.

It is hot. Sticky. Clammy. Close under the mango tree. Gnats buzz around ripe mangos. Juices leaking slowly. Dripping onto your navel for me to lick out.

The air vibrates with heat and your fingers slide down the cello strings. Vibrating on A minor. The movement of your arm bending.

Gliding. Wrist bent bow holding. Sweat drips into the nape of your neck. Ready for me to lick out. Notes pass between your strings into my ears as we lie naked under the mango tree.

Cello strings from the night before moving me. My tongue in your navel. Yours down my neck. My hand between your legs. Yours on my breast.

Cello notes. That is what you taste of. You throwing your bow at me. Strings sharp words cutting deep. Sweat dripping into the nape of your neck.

Mangoes thrown at you. Your head too small to hit. Split on the wall behind you. Juices splatter words onto your skin. I lick them from your flesh.

Salty the words taste as I lick them from you. Moans vibrating at the base of you. Strings snapping because of you. Ripe mango cello light skin bathed in air too close.

Mangoes are to be eaten on hot days. Under clammy trees. A minor note vibrating from your fingers between my legs. Juices flowing down your fingertips.

It is hot. Sticky. Clammy. Close under the mango tree. Gnats buzz around ripe mangoes. Juices leaking slowly. Dripping onto your navel for me to lick out.

Letter 16: You told me this dream while I was mowing the lawn one morning

I walk along the cliff edge
tufts of wet grass slicing at ankles.
Barefoot.
Feel the cold earth. Feel

Thawed birds lie on the kitchen counter

I look down to the shadows between the rocks
sunrise carving the cliff.
Bare legged.
Feel the rocks jagged. Feel

You collect them in the morning on your walks

I watch the darkened sea rise and swell
crash heavy into the rocks.
Bare armed.
Feel the sea spray freezing. Feel

Cape Gannet, *Morus capensis*. The diving bird

I hear the birds scream above the howling wind
calling to each other
Bare bodied.
Feel the sound resonate. Feel

They dive up to 100km/h headfirst into the ocean

Sometimes they catch the fish

Sometimes they break their necks

Diving into the rocks into their mates

Sometimes their bodies wash ashore

And you cut deep through the breastbone to remove their lungs

I want to be a Gannet screaming against
the wind diving to break my neck
Bare hearted.
Feel the dark the cold. Feel

You always said if I stood too close to the edge, I would eventually fall
Would you pick me up and remove
my lungs? To keep in a jar by the kettle?
Would you feed my body to the pigs you keep?

Letter 17: I was trying desperately to make you stay with me in Durban, but you weren't ready

Would we have been the same

If you had wanted to stay here with me?

If you thought better of me in the end?

If you felt stronger for me than you did?

If you thought that maybe, we would have survived?

Would we have been the same if we were in a life raft out on the ocean?

Alone?

I stand before you iron pillar on a pier ravaged by the ocean listening for the movement of your tongue in a mouth locked shut But I stand here before you carrion rotting and maggot filled gorged on by woolly necked storks crows waiting for a sound to be born in your lungs I stand here before you pastry stretched thin like skin peeled off and eaten after sun burn to beseech you for words to ooze out your skin and settle in the hair on my arms but nothing comes so we stand here like two trees wrapped in cellophane struck by lightning.

That drips slow and cold.

In the corner of the room the ceiling leaks.

Mould small and grey.

Grows gradually like a shadow.

Somewhere outside.

A small animal runs for cover.

Rain falls steady.

Around the paving the water pools.

And you are still not home.

Letter 20: When can we talk about what happened?

I want to hold you – to cover your body with a blanket made from my skin

I want to feel the imprints of your bones - chisels against the sinews in my stomach

But you stand alone on a rock in an ocean thrashed by wind

Like an eyelash poised on the curve of your cheek

I want to peel the tides from your hair and sniff your scent

I want to yell out my sorrow but you will not hear

You sit alone – a single shard of obsidian teetering in the bell jar

I want to hurl you through these walls you've built

I want to see your bones pierce your skin – crimson against this white

The well inside you cannot be so deep

That it is this easy for you to leave me so thirsty.

The kitchen was bathed in God. Black moonlight shone through the open door. Outside the world raged and the trees bent to hold their branches from falling. In the long grass a mannequin whistled three blind mice and shadows prowled around the window. Rain dripped through the ceiling and pooled around the fridge. The chair sat with its back to the table calling the moonlight and God swarmed heavy. I watched the water drain through a slot in the floor taking the shadows with it. You had said you'd be gone just five minutes. But the door had stood ajar all day.

Waiting

Silent in the back row

Of the church

You are still

Not welcome here

After all you put me

Through my funeral or is

It you that has a smell like

The smell in the

Flower bed after rain A rat

Decaying still your voice in my sleep

Calling the wind blows

The smell closer still

I lie here waiting

For you.

PART THREE

Letters to me

Date: 4 March 2019 – Death

Place: 306 Blackburn Road, Durban North

(I lived here alone like a black crow in the snowy mountains – we never went to the Berg you know)

Sitting in the waiting room in the psychiatric hospital in Howick, the first thing I realise is that mistakes were bound to be made. Accidentally, intentionally, self-sabotaging moments. If only everyone else could hear the blood howling in my ears. I didn't know what to do anymore, the rays of sunlight had turned grey. I lay like tissue paper at the bottom of the washing machine. How could this all come to naught? I have so many things to say to myself, to you, to my parents. There is no sorry now.

To be an oak tree, cored and knotted visible on the outside

To be an oak tree standing tall and warped for all to see alone in the forest

To be sometimes seen naked and bare barked, winter cold colours

To be more than just I am, felled like words and turned out in dust to be reused

To be more than just an oak tree, a table, a wall, a small round ball admired

To be ears that hear the whispers of the wind felt in my twigs like feelers

To be an oak tree under which you come and sit and talk to me uninhibited

To be your soundboard, tambourine, ears, and words as they tumble to me

To be the ring you bind to my finger, an oak in-lay made from my roots

To be your oak tree in a forest of trees less gnarled less fraying.

I wanted to call you mother even before I knew you

Before we met and the oceans flooded through us

Before I was a mustard seed planted in you

I wanted to call you mother even before I knew you

Before I came like sand in the night and built dunes against you

Before I nibbled from you like a mouse taking without notice

I wanted to call you mother even before I knew you

Before I grew older and formed loving words I forgot to say

Before I walked with two legs like a creeper constantly moving

I wanted to call you mother even before I knew you

Before you held me a blanket against the wind

Before you laid me down a pile of bones dry dust

I wanted to call you mother before I even knew you

Before I was squeezed out like water between grouting

Before I grew weak a fountain in daylight switched off

I always wanted to call you mother.

How to fly without wings

A bird clipped falling

How to breathe without lungs

A fish amongst the dried leaves

How to see without eyes

A deer mounted on the wall waiting

How to play without arms

A child born lifeless and small

How to feel without a heart

Small brittle bones piercing skin cold

How to love without a rib cage

Rock pigeons calling to each other in the wind

How to live without this

A mad condensed unthinking

mould grows silently like sleep under
the floor it entangles my feet birds in a net
choking sounds at night burrow into
my nails chalk on the car bonnet my
tongue moves with the words that i
wish to say a limp fish on the jetty
hollow is my mind a cave underground
flooded by algae eels probing in corners
before me the fountain is flowing out
the mouth of the Venus statue toss a coin
into the water silver i want to swallow it whole
to be greater than the grass singing on the
cliff edge open my eyes and see your face
across the telephone line a small fly
dark oozes from these white walls
to see no more no eyes just glass balls.

Again, again, again How do I express to you how my left brain and right brain fight like dogs My mind, my mind my mind Needs to be scratched from the inside like a sore, scabbed and dry Rubbing, rubbing, rubbing How can I express to you my thoughts a fountain Flowing, flowing, flowing The sun shines bright like floodlights out your eyes I see, I see, I see But don't because my eyes fight like wild animals A kill, a kill, a kill How do I tell you I am Unwell, unwell, unwell My serotonin levels have spun I see, I see, I see The end was before the beginning.

Letter 29: Abstracts from my time during and after the psychiatric facility in Durban North.

In the light of day, I called you by name until even the cracks in the bricks of my room in the Nurture Rehabilitation and Psychiatric facility knew each vowel. From wall to darkest pit the bricks were my currency for time while I waited for you. I had asked you to keep space for me like empty streets in the rain at 2am but you didn't. I wanted to be ok and feel the life in me flow from my fingerprints to the white blood cells in the marrow of my bones. I tried to extract life from me with cigarette burns and shards of glass tearing through to veins. But life never flowed fluid out of me. It splattered and pooled and congealed. At Nurture, we learnt how to control our anger. Count to 3. But it still burned in my lungs. They teach you how to cope but not how to live. How to remove. How to deal with the things only you can see. Specks of dust floating in your vision. You promised you'd always wait for me. I am a swallow flying to you only to find you are flying south, with another. No one teaches you in the facility how to heal that wound. They give you the needle and thread. They give you the time. They show you how to sew it closed, but how do you keep it shut? The psychiatric facility is filled with me and like me and those not like me. We sit and learn and listen while our medication is adjusted like the drip rate on a grape vine's drip irrigation system. It is sterile. Masked. White and humming. I cannot fault it. It taught me how to be me when you are not there. How to walk, to talk, to see, to feel, to express as if I am still breathing. The occupational therapist said it would take a while, but I'll be ok. I believed her because when I walked drunken and enraged down the empty street in the rain at 2am, I was not cursing your name. Search for me, I beg you, for you will find me washed out there slowly seeping through the drain. Not everyone can be saved.

Letter 30: Do you know what depression feels like, dear reader?

I open the windows just enough to let the net curtains balloon. The sun bakes the bed. I lie naked and sweating. Mind is blank as the light dances across the mushroom walls. My bedroom hums in the heat. What to do today? Another day too heavy to get out of bed. Is it worth brushing my teeth? Must I shower? Cold water running down my spine will remove the salt crystals from a night of tossing and turning. Will it remove the fog mingling between the neurons? I don't remember when I last washed. So much effort to move. Or dress. Chip packets and chocolate wrappers swirl around the floor and the cool breeze hits them. I count to 10. Slowly. 1 Mississippi 2 Mississippi 3 Mississippi. Like my mother used to do when I refused to do something. 10 seconds is all you have before I *bliksem* you. 6 Mississippi. I get up. Reluctantly my bones move too. I head to the shower. Work will call. I'm late again. Still the same car trouble? It's time to get a new one they will say. How do I tell them it takes all of me to just show up? They don't ask me if I'm living, they ask if I'm ok. I'm ok. Always. Anyone can smile.

Letter 31: Last moments, will I remember myself?

Outside I watch a robin bathing in a puddle on the lawn. It rained yesterday. The water shimmers on its back. The koi pond ripples the reflection of the willows above. The cool breeze whispers against my skin. Such calm. Such peace. The fish gulp unsuspecting insects off the surface. Too long have they floated there. The hydrangeas bloom blue. They remind me of your eyes. Your scent against me. Days I long for again like pennies dropped into a wishing well. Not all wishes come true. A fish eagle calls somewhere up high and the hush of the day swarms around my heart. I tighten the rope carefully around my neck. Silence. Fish eagle. Robin. Water. Koi gulping. Your smell. The last moments I will remember.

Lying under the lemon tree we planted, I see the sky in parts. There are so many words for the colour blue. The swallows dart after insects like paper aeroplanes I made as a child. I am statuesque standing in walls of memory. We had so many names we called each other. Love burnt into my arms. Memories of us, you, my parents, batter my skull like moths in a lamp shade, can't escape. An olive thrush hops through the leaves next to me bringing me back. I should go inside, do some work. It's getting late. I am tired and wonder why won't the grass grow over me here, while I sleep? I want to switch my lights off. My brain scarred with emotions, felt, will not stop beating. Now is not the time and the swallows call, letting each other know where they will roost.

Do you know how many bodies we have? How many feelings we feel? Can you count the eyelashes I lose when our faces touch? I want to leave but not leave you.

I had a dream once. I saw a doe, brown and graceful in some snow. She smelt like you, courageous yet gentle. But she left just as soon as she arrived. Like a hummingbird. Here, then not. Is it strange to dream of a place unknown? Two beating hearts lie in a box somewhere in the ocean. Is it normal to dream such dreams? A collection of light fills the backs of my eyelids.

I am a thousand pieces of light. The stars above the Karoo, hear the jackals call. To leave in a thousand pieces like water draining through the grate in the alley. I don't want to leave but the doe in the snow has called me by name.

Letter 34: To my parents. To you. I have seen the days stretched out before me. Like the burn marks
across my skin

Our lives are stones along the road. Grass tall and wailing. How did I get here?

Bones carried in the breeze as dust. My parents couldn't lay me down just yet.

Three birds now two. Swallows building a clay nest under a streetlight.

My parents arrived. Separate cars. As insects swarmed like mist through a valley.

And then you arrived. Unannounced. Holding frayed letters to me that you couldn't send.

Like words sewn into gums. To write is cathartic. To burn is to release. Like ashes.

A stream running through a desert. A donkey brays beyond the fence.

You lay me down in the red sand. Here in the wind to be gone.

Like words shouted into water. It was you who taught me the meaning of Vita Nostra.

The rooms we build:

A Reflexive Essay on my collection “Letter to ourselves”

In this essay, “The rooms we build”, I am going to analyse how letter writing affects memory and relationships, and acts as a form of catharsis in moments of deep emotion. In discussing these elements, I will examine how place evokes emotions and memories. Furthermore, through fictional characters, I will examine the mother daughter relationship, the lover relationship and the relationship with self. Finally, I will look at the writing that influenced my poetry in terms of style, theme and structure. The structure of this collection became vital in telling the overall story. The main character is a woman who battles with mental health issues, and at the beginning of the collection has already committed suicide.

My creative component, “Letters to ourselves”, is written in an epistolary format. It is split into three parts. Each part is made up of a series of letters that evaluates a relationship, memories and emotions in response to this relationship. Part one focuses on a mother’s relationship with her deceased daughter. This section explores how the lack of communication between parent and child has resulted in an array of emotions such as guilt and confusion. Furthermore, through her letters the mother asks, and gets to, a series of quandaries that she is facing.

In part two the relationship is now between the lover and the deceased woman. This relationship is written through letters addressed to the lover from the woman. These letters examine the beauty and connectedness in the relationship, and how the relationship dissolves into a messy break up. This break-up takes an emotional and mental toll on the woman. She is left with questions, heartache and confusion. Through letter writing she unravels her emotional pain which evokes her memories.

In part three we truly see the deceased woman for who she is. In this section, the woman is writing to herself. She is exploring the past, her memories and current emotions. In doing this we also uncover the fact that she has severe mental issues that were not addressed or understood by the other characters. She ‘deconstructs’ herself to the point where she eventually takes her own life. This ending links to the beginning of the collection, where the mother is already talking to the deceased woman.

When writing poetry there is both a conscious and subconscious process taking place. Form, style, voice, structure and story begin to take shape and before you know it, the collection of poetry

has begun to tell a story all on its own. Each poem links into the next poem and the words begin to interact with each other, until what you thought would happen has become something else entirely. The collection I have written fell into this process. I planned out my collection carefully, looked at the story arc, defined the story and characters, planned the structure and finally found each character's voice.

However, as the story developed and my collection began to blossom, the direction of the structure and style changed. I went from writing within the concept of each memory and character represented by a room to writing within a letter format. The characters started to develop and tell their own stories, having their own voice and style. Punctuation (or the lack thereof) then became a crucial element within the structure of each poem. I used punctuation as a secondary element in trying to convey emotion and meaning (more on this later).

Before long, I realised that the collection, titled, "The rooms we build: Poems of memory, identity and relationships", was not at all about rooms but rather letters conveying memories and unsaid conversations with a deceased child. The collection moved into a form of catharsis, with memory, relationships and mental health as themes.

The original creative component looked at life in terms of rooms. Each room was an element in life, a relationship, a story, and memory. My collection was initially going to look at three moments in the life of a few characters and how these characters (represented by the rooms) interacted with each other. This never occurred. As I began writing I found that a better vehicle for exploration and insight was letter writing. However, rooms and letters are more closely related than I realised. It was only upon analysis that I noticed that each section of the three parts became its own room of place, memory, identity exploration and relationship building.

The question we must therefore ask ourselves is, "how do letters relate to rooms?" Letters are single moments captured in words. Each letter is unique and individual, just like a room. A letter conveys story, memory and relationship through language. Where a room is a sensory experience, a letter is a cognitive experience. A room holds visual clues and is a physical place, while letters speak to place and the senses through the use of language. Overall, a letter is basically a written room.

However, letters are not only used to communicate with other people, but very often are written only for the self. The process of writing, whether it be structured, or as a stream of consciousness, ultimately has a cathartic affect for the person writing it. In their book *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, Barton and Hall (2000) discuss the fact that in letters you can unpack emotions, events, memories and explore identity, places and reminisce about life in general. By using letters, I

have managed to create a story line in three parts. Each part is a communication to the daughter, lover and self. The stories each character tells are a compilation of letters that are both cathartic as well as things that should have been spoken, but for which it is now too late.

I am fascinated by the process of letter writing as a psychological process of dealing with grief and healing as discussed by Tony Cartwright (1996). Things that need to be said are often not said and then remain bottled up. This adds to “grief, especially after death” (389). So, the question then is what is catharsis and why is it important in our psychological make-up? According to Sally Scopas:

Catharsis is the process of releasing strong or pent-up emotions through art. Aristotle coined the term catharsis—which comes from the Greek *kathairein* meaning “to cleanse or purge”—to describe the release of emotional tension that he believed spectators experienced while watching dramatic tragedy. Today, the word catharsis can be used in reference to any experience of emotional release or cleansing brought about by a work of art. (2017, 3)

In terms of the above the following ideas are critical: catharsis is a purging of emotions; it cleanses the psychological and heals the soul. This becomes truly important when dealing with grief.

Catharsis is brought about through art, and in my particular case the art is letter writing.

According to Barton and Hall, “letter writing is not only a form of communication but an old way of organising thoughts, feelings and ideas” (2000, 3). The process of writing allows one to reflect, rework and negotiate the field of communication. Furthermore, as Cartwright observes, “writing allows for the processing of events, memories and the discussion of places” (1996, 390). Moreover, in my collection of poetry, not only do I use letter writing as a style and structure for my work, but I also use it to delve into an examination of relationships, identity and mental illness.

According to the Oxford Concise Dictionary, a relationship can be defined as “a partnership between two people” or “the way in which two or more people or things are connected, or the state of being connected” (Online, 2021). But, according to Meeks *et al* (1998), relationships thrive or decay in response to communication or the lack thereof. In my collection, I have explored relationships from the following point of view: “perspective-taking, self-disclosure, conflict tactics and relational competence, as well as love attitudes” (Meeks 1998, 755). From this, I looked at how relationships break down when the other has a mental health disorder.

In her poem ‘Sleepchains’, from the collection *Decreation* (2006), Anne Carson examines the process of break-up through a loss of communication, and a failure to understand the self. Carson

delicately unpacks the feeling of loss within a relationship when she compares the vastness of the ship-less ocean to the feeling of being on a ship. This sense of isolation mimics the relationship she has with her significant other in the poem:

Who can sleep when she –
hundreds of miles away I feel that vast breath
fan her restless decks.
Cicatrice by cicatrice
all the links
rattle once.

Here we go mother on the ship-less ocean.

Pity us, pity the ocean, here we go.

(3)

In her collection, *Decreation*, Carson focuses strongly on the philosophy and teachings of Simone Weil. Weil coined the term “decreation” as a process whereby one “ought to give up one’s existence” and “cease to exist as oneself” (Reed 2013, 25). Here, in doing this from the perspective of a relationship, the relationship will cease to exist as the people in it slowly move away and their identity dies.

Although I do not focus on “decreation” as a loss of self, I do focus on the concept of the death of a relationship through the death of communication and a failure to understand the self. For example, the relationship between the protagonist in my creative collection and her lover breaks down as the lover moves away, and the identity and mental health of the protagonist is called into question. In my poem, ‘Letter 14: March’, we note that the lover moves away without telling the protagonist – a clear sign that there is a breakdown in communication in their relationship. This causes the protagonist to unravel psychologically, and from here onwards her letters become more desperate, raging, seeking and disturbing. This finally leads into the third part where the protagonist unravels completely and gets committed to an institution.

In her poem ‘Area’, the American poet, Ariana Reines, looks at how it is not just from partners that we have secrets, but also from God too. All relationships have secrets, and these secrets, I believe, are part of the slow process of decay in a relationship. By keeping the breakdown in her mental

health a secret, the protagonist in my collection does not allow for help or understanding to come from her mother or lover. As a result, she faces this isolating element alone. In doing this she causes a rift to form, and by not communicating her thoughts and feelings she pushes the other away. In ‘Area’, Reines writes:

With go, believe it or not. I’ve got secrets

I wouldn’t know how to tell if I wanted to. I crossed

My heart for the things that rip me to shreds in this world. I hoped to die

(2006, 36)

Here it is clear to see that her secrets have affected her mental health and in turn her relationship. This mirrors the feelings and thoughts of my protagonist. This can be seen in ‘Letter 18: I stand before you’, where the speaker cries out:

I stand before you iron pillar on a pier ravaged by the ocean listening for the movement of your tongue in a mouth locked shut But I stand here before you carrion rotting and maggot filled gorged on by woolly necked storks crows waiting for sound to be born in your lungs I stand here before you pastry stretched thin like skin peeled off and eaten after sun burn to beseech you for words to ooze out your skin and settle in the hair on my arms and nothing comes so we stand here like two trees wrapped in cellophane struck by lightning.

We can note that the macabre nature of the speaker’s analogies links to her own sense of self. Where she discusses being carrion, we can see that her sense of self-worth has been depleted. She is unravelling and desperately trying to communicate to her lover: “beseech you for words to ooze out your skin and settle in the hair on my arms and nothing comes”. But her lover gives her nothing. Again, this is an example where secrets and the “decreation” of relationships occur, and have adverse effects on partners.

Next – as an examination of relationships through reflection and memory – I will focus on the mother’s conversation with her deceased daughter and the daughter’s conversations with her lover. The conversations with the self, become an introspection of mental health and a reflection on life through mental illness.

The daughter’s conversation with her lover becomes a reflection of their relationship. The relationship fails through a breakdown in communication and the lover eventually leaves. A lot of what happens in their relationship is driven by the poor mental health of the protagonist.

Communication again becomes key, and if only the letters could have been sent or the content spoken about, then their relationship could have been mended. This can be seen in ‘Letter 20: When can we talk about what happened?’ Here the lover has closed himself off to the speaker and the speaker’s desperately trying to bring herself back into their relationship and her partner’s life:

I want to peel the tides from your hair and sniff your scent

I want to yell out my sorrow but you will not hear

You sit alone – a single shard of obsidian teetering in the bell jar.

Relationships revolve around communication, and as such, this section looks at how the lack of communication can affect a relationship. The fact that what needs to be said is not said shows how letter writing becomes important. We often hide behind the words we pen. Often, if we can only have the courage to send these letters we will have the courage to open conversations. The conversations are often the catharsis we need. So, as a result, in my collection I wanted to explore the ramifications of not sending letters.

Not only does the ending of the relationship set the protagonist on a downward spiral, but it also forces her to reflect on her own mental state and what is happening to her. Through this reflection of her life, she gains an understanding into her downfalls. Ultimately her mental state alters how she views herself and the world around her and thus leads her to commit suicide. Mental health is almost a taboo subject in conversation and is considered a weakness. Yogan Pillay writes: “By not discussing, helping or reflecting on mental health issues, it often arises in breakdowns and ultimately suicide – especially in teens and young adults” (2019, 1).

This third chapter in the life of the protagonist is semi- autobiographical. It became my own act of catharsis – which was completely unintentional. The protagonist in this chapter is struggling with negotiating her mental state and the events that have lead up to her last few moments. The breakdown in her relationship with her family, her lover and even with herself leads her to make the decision to end her life. The most personal poem in this collection is ‘Letter 29: Abstracts from my time during and after the psychiatric facility in Durban North’. Here the speaker is discussing her experience in the facility. The condensed form and jumbled punctuation are there to add to the sense of confusion and claustrophobia. Overall, this poem was a self-reflexive and, ultimately, a cathartic act for me as it forced me to confront my own fears and mental health diagnosis.

Mental health affects our judgement, relationships, identity and self-image. In South Africa, according to Pillay (2019), mental health receives little focus: “One in six South Africans suffer from

anxiety, depression, or substance-use disorders, 40% of South Africans with HIV suffer from a mental disorder, 41% of pregnant women are depressed, if motor vehicle crashes and crime are considered, about 60% of South Africans could be suffering from post-traumatic stress and only 27% of South Africans with severe mental disorders receive treatment” (463). This bleak picture calls into focus the need for South Africans to start a conversation around this subject. We need politicians, poets and the parents of our country to address these issues. It is only when a conversation is created that we can begin to move forward. Pillay’s article was in the back of my mind when I was writing and it encouraged me to touch on my own mental health journey through the eyes of the protagonist.

Having been diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder myself I was able to write from a place of knowledge and sympathy. Borderline Personality Disorder, according to Gunderson et al, is a mental health condition whereby a person is “impact[ed by] the way you think and feel about yourself and others, causing problems functioning in everyday life. It includes self-image issues, difficulty managing emotions and behaviour, and a pattern of unstable relationships” (2018, 1). The decisions my character makes are directly related to her self-image and understanding of herself. The objective behind this was to open the reader’s eyes to the pain and difficulty of having a mental disorder that specifically affects relationships. Ultimately, this is the reason the protagonist commits suicide at the end of the collection.

South Africa has several poets that examine mental health issues in their poetry. In her online article, ‘Musawenkosi Khanyile’s use of poetry to look beneath the surface’ (2021) Liesl Jobson discusses Khanyile’s outlook on mental health in his own poetry, and the relationship between writing and therapy. Arguing that “writing is a common way to make sense of trauma” (2), Khanyile encourages patients to write as a way for them to process and understand their emotions and their trauma. He continues: “Poetry is a literal and metaphoric tool for self-reflection and self-healing. It can be a passageway to the parts of ourselves that have been long buried deep within us, most often by trauma and shame” (2). This excavation of what lies hidden in the self is a fundamental element in my own work. I use letter writing as a way for my characters to process their traumas so that they can better understand themselves. Overall, I would argue that mental health plays a huge role in my writing, and this is what links closest to the epistolary form of the collection.

Furthermore, I firmly believe that memory and place play a role in understanding the self, and how memories associated with particular events, and the exploration of such memories, can aid in healing us. Physical location arises during these moments of memory to mark the places where certain events took place. Although I have not used rooms to link my characters together, I have used

physical addresses as place. This marks the location in Durban where these events took place. These physical places signify time in the life of the characters. Each moment is filled with memory, conversations about mental health, love, identity and relationships. Like letters, homes are filled with rooms and memories that have created who we are. These memories could be triggered by smell, sights or sounds. In my poetry, memories are triggered by emotions and visual cues. Thus, place through sense becomes memory and memory either becomes a sense of freedom (as for the mother) or a sense of trauma and self-loathing (as in the case of the protagonist). In my own collection I have done this through chapter titles with the following information as an example: “Date: 10 September 1992 – Until death / Place: 47 Manor Road, Hilton. 3245 (childhood home)”.

This allows me to contextualise the relationships and the story, while also adding a point of reference for the reader. Moreover, the place creates a beginning for the memories. For the sake of not making this collection entirely autobiographical the places are not formally places I have lived in. Nor are some of them actual addresses from my life. Furthermore, in the poem, ‘Letter 6: Umkomaas Christmas Day 2001, Dad took you to the ocean, he always took you to the ocean’, we can see that the mother uses memory and sense and place to exercise her own form of catharsis:

Near Umkomaas.

Like your touch, small, a breeze, gentle calling

To your daddy, a tiny voice like falling

Leaves.

Here the mother is recalling how her child’s voice sounded on that day, and in this process of remembering she begins to deal with her own reality. This is noted at the end of the poem when she speaks in the past tense: “I had forgotten your sunscreen / So you had chapped lips, a small smile, bright eyes like copper coins.”

In my collection, I explored place, memory and relationships through subtle violence, contrasting images and an array of forms and styles that cut out the sentimental and exposed the pain of life in a brutal and honest way. I wanted to force my reader into a realm of discomfort that would challenge their perspectives and understanding of the human condition. The mother character, for example, explores memory in a positive way. She remembers to heal from her trauma. The place mentioned is her daughter’s childhood home where happy events took place. She remembers them with fondness and tries to draw comfort from this.

Contrasted with this are parts 2 and 3. Here the daughter remembers events and emotions that occurred at each place. Instead of them acting as a place of healing they become a place of trauma, feeding her mental health issues. Her letters become a cry for help. Here one can see that place is closely linked to memory and memories can change our understanding of place. This is evident in my poem, 'Letter 32: Where I sleep in the garden at 306 Blackburn'. Here the speaker is discussing how this place has become a place of finality. She is beginning to decide her fate and will act upon it. Reading the below extract we can see that 306 Blackburn is a place of remembering the past (poems that have come before this point) and is now a place of action:

Lying under the lemon tree we planted, I see the sky in parts. There are so many words for the colour blue. The swallows dart after insects like paper aeroplanes I made as a child. I am statuesque standing in walls of memory. We had so many names we called each other. Love burnt into my arms. Memories of us, you, my parents, batter my skull like moths in a lamp shade, can't escape. An olive thrush hops through the leaves next to me bringing me back. I should go inside, do some work, it's getting late. I am tired and wonder why won't the grass grow over me here, while I sleep? I want to switch my lights off. My brain scarred with emotions, felt, will not stop beating. Now is not the time and the swallow call, letting each other know where they will roost.

The connection between memory and place has been a focus study in Geography and Psychology over many years. I explore this in my creative component. However, memory is linked to place through more than geography. Modern identities have been created through exposure to both the physical "place" and the cyber "place". The concept of origin in modern society is different to that of previous generations. There is a strong link to roots while also a strong desire to leave. These two clashing ideas are explored through my poetry. However, the idea that places trigger memories such as a sense of home, belonging and nostalgia was my focus.

In terms of form, lineation, stanzaic structure and length, each poem is unique to itself. As when writing in a journal, or in a series of letters, paragraphs and lineation take on the form of conscious flow, so does my poetry. I use run-on-lines and broken punctuation to create a sense of chaos and streams of thought. My stanzas are short and act as bursts of memory and clarity in what feels like a chaotic space. However, a structure that tells a story is not the only physical element to this collection. I have taken into careful consideration the use or the lack of punctuation. I feel that more than the use of structure, punctuation became the most important vehicle for storytelling. For

example, 'Letter 2: Dear daughter', has an almost Flash Fiction feel to it with conventional punctuation:

I can still remember the creak in the kitchen floorboard, the one your father forgot to replace. It always gave you away, my little cookie thief. You were always hungry. Snacking through the bread. The butter. The Jam. All the delicious things we could afford to buy you. When your father had his job. While you still lived at home.

However, not all the sentences are complete, allowing important thoughts and highlighted items to stand alone. This is in stark contrast to 'Letter 22: Awaiting you'. This poem has short run-on lines that create a change of pace and flow. The lines are broken up to create a sense of discord. The idea here is that it will mimic uncertainty. These short lines are almost like barked-out commands, thus giving the impression that the speaker is impatient and unwilling to speak to the subject of the poem; in this case, the ex-lover:

Waiting

Silent in the back row

Of the church

You are still

Not welcome here

After all you put me

Through my funeral or is

It you that has a smell like

The smell in the

Flower bed after rain A rat

Decaying still your voice in my sleep

Calling the wind blows

The smell closer still

I lie here waiting

For you.

A final comparison is poem 'Letter 28: Stream of consciousness, white noise', where I use no punctuation marks, just double spaces and capital letters to create the sense of a stream of consciousness and the idea of an overwhelming number of thoughts. I want the reader to be placed in the shoes of the speaker:

Again, again, again How do I express to you how my left brain and right brain fight like
dogs My mind, my mind my mind Needs to be scratched from the inside like a sore,
scabbed and dry Rubbing, rubbing, rubbing How can I express to you my thoughts a
fountain Flowing, flowing, flowing The sun shines bright like floodlights out your eyes
I see, I see, I see But don't because my eyes fight like wild animals A kill, a kill, a kill
How do I tell you I am Unwell, unwell, unwell My serotonin levels have carouselled I
see, I see, I see The end was before the beginning.

Each poem in this collection has its own punctuation unique to that poem. The purpose of this is to evoke a sense of emotion and expression. I want the reader to physically experience, through the process of reading, the exact emotions felt by the speaker. Not only does it evoke emotions as mentioned, but it also becomes a visual representation of emotion. Letters are experienced, like rooms, emotionally, physical, and visually.

The poets I have read have also influenced the content as well as the voice and structure of my poems; with structure being the most prevalent. My work has combined the style and voices of poets who engaged with life at its rawest moments, with the voices of those who were delving into memory, family, place and self-preservation.

Anne Carson, in many ways, highlighted how form can change the mood and voice in a poem. The example below from *Beauty of the Husband* (2005), illustrates how short sentences, broken by full-stops, can cause the reader to pause and ponder each individual word and thought. By doing this, Carson forces the reader to engage with the uncomfortable or the violent in relation to their own situation.

If I could kill you I would then have to make another exactly like you.

Why.

To tell it to.

Perfection rested on them for a moment like calm on a lake.

Pain rested.

(54)

An extract from *Decreation* entitled, ‘The Day Antonioni Came to the Asylum’, shows the depth and dynamics that influenced my writing: “It was the sound of her writing that woke me. Since you ask, this is what I remember. Her desk is just outside my room. Some days I hear sounds too loud. Some days I hear a crowd and there is no crowd” (53).

Anne Carson speaks plainly about everyday images. This is something I linked in my work to cement my characters in place. Here she uses single paragraphs that illustrates single moments in time within the longer poem. I tried to emulate this throughout my own work. Through encapsulating single moments, one places the reader inside that moment. Once they have engaged with the story or character, a devastating line or contrast can be drawn up to create discomfort. In this extract we clearly connect with the speaker as we have all been woken by something. We begin to sympathise with him as we have all heard sounds “too loud”. However, what Carson does next is to tell us that the “I” heard things that did not exist. This shock technique was something I explored in my work.

Not only does my work rely heavily on voice and imagery but also on content. It works in conversation with poets such as Max Ritvo in his collection *Four Reincarnations* (2016). Here, Ritvo speaks about his imminent death. However, this is neither morbid nor depressing. He approaches the subject matter with beautiful imagery. He encapsulates what it means to die and how the human condition, in the end, is nothing but moments before death:

And I am missing everything living
that won't come with me
into this sunny afternoon
-my body lights up for life
like all the wishes being granted in a fountain
at the same instant-
all the coins burning the fountain dry.

(50)

This extract, taken from Ritvo’s poem ‘Afternoon’, highlights the use of imagery. The simile, where he compares his body to that of wishes in a fountain, creates the sense that his body is becoming something imagined and hopeful. Although Ritvo is speaking about his eminent death, he highlights

the beauty of the process with the line, “my body lights up for life / like all the wishes being granted in a fountain”. This quiet imagery is cemented in a reality that we are all aware of, but what makes it so harrowing is the previous stanza where he says that he will miss everything that will not go with him.

Tariro Ndoro and Musawenkosi Khanyile were my close references to place and memory. Ndoro focused closely on life as a foreigner in South Africa. Her poetry is contemporary and expands the boundaries of prose poetry through structure and style. Her poem ‘Francistown’ looks closely at place:

So you're from Zimbabwe

Yes

Yes, we are

How often 'o you come here?

Sometimes, always, when we're hungry

when we've run out of groceries

(41)

The poem has a conversational style that highlights the bleakness of her situation. There are many poems in her collection *Agringada: Like a Gringa, like a Foreigner* that deal with the issue of place. Where we were born and the situation we found ourselves in, at its core, was what shaped us to be who we are. Every time we go back to our roots or are in a place that reminds us of home or our childhood, certain memories are evoked. Beyond this, we are also found in a melancholy of memory when we are reminded of a time better than the current one. Memory placed us in time and places shaped our memory. The exploration of the effects of memory and relationships that Ndoro writes about, were explorations within my own work.

Musawenkosi Khanyile's collection, *All the Places*, had a huge influence on my understanding of what it means to be South African. I drew inspiration from his descriptions of place, and how in his work place and memory were interwoven. This can be seen in his poem, ‘All the Places’:

He cannot look at his sparking fork and knife

without thinking of holidays spent at his father's birthplace

gathered around a huge bowl of maas with his cousins,
digging in with his hands.

(54)

Here memory is anchored in everyday things and it takes him back to his roots, his father's birthplace – a significant place that shaped who he was and how he remembered his life.

As one can see, it is clear how the above influences affected my own writing. I drew inspiration in terms of content, structure and themes from these poets. I used their story telling methods to inspire my own work. Overall, my creative component explores memory, place, mental health and relationships with specific reference to three fictional characters: the self, the lover and the mother. By exploring these relationships, I attempt to highlight the most important features of the previously mentioned themes. And all of this comes within the vehicle of letter writing. Letter writing gave me unique insight into the minds and hearts of the characters, thus allowing for the process of conversation to be deeply personal and cathartic. Finally, with the various influences on my writing, I have used structure, form and punctuation to create a visual emotional response that submerges the reader into the world of the characters.

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