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Willowhaven

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death takes from us not only some particular life within the world, some moment that belongs to us, but, each time, without limit, someone through whom the world, and first of all our own world, will have opened up (Jacques Derrida 2001: 107).

Darling Downs, Queensland, 1982

For about a year when I was fourteen my family lived in a rented farmhouse about thirty minutes outside Toowoomba on the Darling Downs. My father was out of work and our family home had been sold to pay off debts. We moved onto the farm in early spring, but the cold westerly winds of winter were still blowing. The farmhouse creaked and groaned as the wind forced its way inside, blowing in under the doors and up through gaps in the floorboards, like the probing fingers of some invisible creature.

The house was as rustic as the rent was cheap, a small, century old weatherboard cottage with closed-in verandas on three sides. With only one proper bedroom it was a tight squeeze for my two sisters, parents and me. Surrounded by cornfields, the cottage sat on a small slope in the middle of an acre-large yard of dry grass. A huge Weeping Willow provided the only shade. A faded sign hanging loose on the gate read 'Willowhaven', a romantic name that didn't reflect the reality of the place. The verandas, enclosed sometime in the seventies to make a bathroom and two cupboard-sized bedrooms, were not watertight. The ceilings leaked and the windows let in the cold. The house's exterior walls, clad in plasterboard in the seventies as well, were buckled and warped from the weather, which alternated between hot and cold, drought and deluge.



Fig. 1. Westbrook, Darling Downs, Queensland, site of Willowhaven. Photo. by the author

Apart from the general state of disrepair, one thing stood out about Willowhaven. Its cracked gutters and window frames were all painted a vibrant sky blue. The front and back doors were painted the same colour. That blue paint was the only good thing about the place, apart from its setting on the Darling Downs, with its miles and miles of gently undulating hills beneath broad skies.

Before I lived at Willowhaven, I'd never seen a house with blue trim. In Toowoomba, where I grew up, houses were almost universally timber and painted white. The most daring trim colour on those houses was red – but mostly they were decorated in muted greens. The blue gutters and window ledges of Willowhaven intrigued me enough that the next time I saw Modeste Temple, I told her all about it.

Modeste was the mother of my classmate Danny, who was the only kid in my year who wasn't white. The Temples were immigrants from Jamaica. Although a grown-up, Modeste insisted that I always call her by her first name. She was as unlike all the

other mothers as she could be. She spoke with a thick accent in a smoky voice and told fortunes with Tarot cards. When she wasn't rubbing coconut-scented lotion into her dark skin, she was reading books about fortune-telling and ghosts. I found her deeply fascinating.

My first chance to tell Modeste about the blue trim came on the day of my Catholic school's spring fete. Modeste was in charge of the sandwich stall and had insisted that Danny and I help. On a table before us, dozens of cling-wrapped sandwiches glistened in the morning sun. Modeste's dark skin seemed to glisten as well as she arranged the sandwiches into orderly rows. I watched her at work, thinking, She's so, so beautiful. Young to have a son of fourteen, Modeste's eyes were dark yet luminous, her skin flawless. Her jet-black hair hung to the middle of her back in lustrous braids. To a bookish and girly boy who'd never been outside of Queensland, Modeste Temple's existence was proof that there was another, much more interesting world beyond the Darling Downs.

'There, I think that's as pretty as I'm going to get these sandwiches to look,' she said, pushing the last sandwich into its place. 'What do you think, boys?'

Danny shrugged, but I nodded, even though the sandwiches looked a bit limp and sweaty.

'Well, maybe if I arrange them into patterns, like this ...'

She shuffled the corned-beef sandwiches into a star formation, stood back and squinted at them to see what she thought. After a moment she clicked her tongue against her teeth and shuffled them back into rows again.

'That will just have to do,' she said with a small sigh. 'It'll be a miracle if we sell more than half of them.'

Her patois accented voice was drawing the attention of passers-by, though none came to buy sandwiches. They simply stopped and stared, their mouths making small ovals of surprise at seeing someone so striking at our school fete. Once Modeste was done arranging the sandwiches, I described the blue edging on our new home.

Straight away she said, 'Oh honey, the previous tenants must have been Caribbean, just like me.'

I trusted that she was right, even though, as far as I knew, the Temples were the only Caribbean family for miles around.

'In the Caribbean,' she explained, ignoring the lingering gaze of a particularly dumbstruck man, 'we believe that blue paint on windows and doors stops restless spirits, ghosts, from entering the house.'

'How's that supposed to work?' I asked, fascinated.

'Well, honey, spirits will not cross water,' she answered, her almost-black eyes reflecting the sun shining above her head. 'The blue paint looks like water and confuses the spirits so that they don't dare go inside.'

'Oh Mum,' Danny interrupted, rolling his eyes and looking at her with a smirk, 'you don't really believe that, do you?'

‘Yes, I do, Danny,’ she said flatly, turning her back to him, pointedly straightening a row of glinting egg and lettuce sandwiches.

Modeste’s turned back silenced Danny like a no-talking sign in a library. I threw him a hateful glance without him seeing, thinking, I could kick you. I wanted to hear more about the blue paint and the restless spirits. I was much more interested in listening to Modeste talking about ghosts than in listening to her son, no matter what the topic. Danny was obsessed with cricket and spoke of little else. I couldn’t have cared less about cricket. I barely knew what a wicket was, let alone an over.

Unlike his mother, Danny was awkward looking, with wiry hair and too-large front teeth. His voice, strained through those tightly packed teeth, always sounded wet. His complexion was not as dark or as glossy as his mother’s, but closer to that of his white father. He took after his father in personality as well. Mr. Temple was an accountant and so dull that he even bored himself, preferring anyone else’s company to his own. Danny was even duller than that. I was only friends with him because of Modeste, whose attention made me feel almost as interesting as she was. I put up with Danny’s endless monologues about cricket and his wet voice only so that I could spend time with her. I felt bad that I didn’t like Danny as much as he liked me, especially as he always seemed so desperately needy, like his father. Ironically, he was probably my best school friend, my only school friend if I were to be honest.

Once Danny had upset his mother, she could stay annoyed for hours. He often irritated her so much that she refused to speak to him for whole days at a time.

‘Caribbean mothers know how to hold a grudge,’ Danny said on one of those occasions, a sad smile on his face. ‘It’s like their religion.’

There was no point hanging around the sandwich stall now that Modeste wasn’t talking. So I said goodbye to Danny and got up to leave. He nodded in response, waving half-heartedly, his eyes still resting resentfully on his mother’s back.

As I stepped out from behind the sandwich-laden table, Modeste leaned towards me and whispered, ‘It also stops blood-drinkers.’

‘Sorry?’ I asked.

‘The blue paint, honey. It stops blood-sucking bugs from getting into the house. It’s even supposed to work on roaches.’

She smiled, letting me know that her irritation was not directed at me.

‘Now you go have fun, honey.’

I smiled back at her and went to explore the fete, my mind already turning to the prospect of buying a toffee apple.

As far as bugs were concerned, the blue paint was a failure. Willowhaven was home to a veritable bestiary of six and eight legged things. Wasps nested in the eaves. Spiders spun webs in the corners of the high ceilings. Ant colonies occupied the spaces between the walls. Frogs croaked from beneath the floorboards where the leaky pipes created a perfect spawning ground. At night, as soon as the lights were

switched on, moths and beetles came from every nook and cranny to swarm around the bare bulbs. It didn't matter how tightly secured the windows were, somehow the bugs found a way inside.

On the other hand, I never saw or heard a hint of a ghost. No spectral shadows or lights, no ghostly moans or sighs. There was a time, just weeks after the school fete, when I really hoped there would be, for the sake of Modeste.

Danny Temple died suddenly in late September. Viral pneumonia nested in his lungs one Sunday night and took him to the grave the following one.

By mid-October, the weather had warmed up and the sky above the Downs gone a paler blue with the increased light. On a Saturday morning under that paler sky I settled into a creaky wicker chair in the shade of the willow in our yard, with a cup of tea in hand. We only had two of those wicker chairs. There was always a fight between my sisters and I over who got to sit in them, especially as one was always reserved for my mother. I was home alone, my parents and sisters were in town for the day, so I could sit in whichever chair I wanted. I was making the most of the solitude by spending as much time outside as possible. The farmhouse was dark and cold, but the outside offered views of those low, rolling hills and fields of honey-coloured grass that spread from the edge of our cornfield to the horizon.

In the distance, a Black-breasted Buzzard circled above an empty paddock, its shadow ghosting over the ground below. Where'd he come from? I thought, knowing that buzzards weren't a common site on the Downs. Normally living far to the west, they only came this close to the coast when their natural range was hit hard by drought. The sight of a buzzard over the Downs was a sign of a bad dry spell coming, a trigger for farmers to stockpile feed and conserve water.

I was still watching the buzzard when a car turned into our long drive, throwing behind it a small cloud of dust. The drive was rough and the ground dry, even though it had only rained a month or so ago. The dust cloud trailing the car stretched from the dirt road leading to our house all the way to the highway. Whoever it was had come from town. Who is that?, I wondered. The morning sun hung directly behind the car, making it hard to see. I could just make out that the car was red, but that was about all. It wasn't our car, ours was white. I shielded my eyes with a hand, trying to see who was behind the wheel, but it was no use.

I stood up to head inside, planning to bolt the door and pretend not to be home. The idea of being home alone with a stranger made me nervous. But then the car came close enough for me to see that it was a Citroen. Only one person I knew owned a red Citroen, and that was Modeste Temple.

My heart lurched and then sank into my stomach. What was she doing here?

I hadn't seen Modeste since Danny died. I didn't go to the funeral, didn't even send a card. I looked over to our blue front door, wondering if I could dash inside and hide before she saw me. I didn't know how to act with her now that her son was dead. But it was too late. She'd already turned into the yard and was steering towards the tree where I stood. The Citroen came to a stop just a few feet away from the willow. The

engine stuttered into silence; a silence that hung in the air as heavily as Danny's death.

Modeste stepped out of the car and into that silence. Her long braids were still glossy, but she'd tied them back into a ponytail rather than letting them hang freely as she'd always done in the past. Her black dress almost disappeared against her skin. Her eyes were shaded by dark sunglasses. She was much thinner than she'd been just weeks before. She walked straight towards me, repeatedly flattening her dress with the palms of her hands in an agitated way and straightening her hair.

'Is he here?' she asked suddenly in a desperate voice. I'd never heard her sound like that, it made my stomach tense with fear. 'Tell me, is he here? My boy, is he here?'

'Danny?' I stuttered, 'but, Danny's –'

'I've been waiting for him to come back to me,' she interrupted. 'His spirit should have risen by now, but he hasn't come to me. I thought, because you were so close, he might be here.'

She looked around, as if expecting to see the ghostly form of Danny lurking somewhere in our unkempt yard.

My mind reeled. Does she really think Danny's ghost is here? Confused and anxious, I said the first thing that came to me.

'But, the paint, the blue paint around the windows and doors. He can't be here, can he? You said that ghosts can't enter a house with blue trim.'

She thought about that for a minute.

'I forgot about the paint,' she moaned, her head sagging. 'I've been waiting for him to come,' she muttered again, her face turned towards the ground. 'Why hasn't he come?'

Her voice was pleading, frantic, as though begging the earth for an answer.

She seemed so desperate to be consoled that I couldn't leave that question unanswered.

'I ... I thought you said that only restless spirits return? Maybe he hasn't come back because he's ... happy where he is.'

The look on her face made me wish I hadn't said anything. Her jaw clenched and her lips tightened into a near grimace. Her hands balled into fists and thumped at her sides. She shook her head slowly from side to side, refusing to accept what I'd said.

Then she turned her face to the sky and stamped one foot on the ground and snarled, 'No, no.'

She stood there, her face turned upwards, shaking her head, for what seemed like minutes.

Then, after a long while, she went still, looked up and said, 'He's really not here? My boy?'

'No, he's not here,' I answered, shaken.

She nodded, very gently and just the once, finally accepting it. All the tension drained from her body then, triggered by that inner change. Her shoulders dropped, her hands unclenched, her jaw relaxed. I could almost feel her coming back to her senses. She looked over at me, an embarrassed smile coming to her lips. She took a breath and stepped closer. I almost flinched, but she didn't notice.

'What must you think of me,' she said quietly, sounding almost like herself again.

She reached out and touched me softly on the shoulder.

'I've missed you, honey,' she added, before sitting in my mother's wicker chair and looking out over the fields.

She kept her eyes covered, but I could tell that she'd seen the buzzard circling above the paddock in the distance, and was now watching its slow movement.

'It's a Black-breasted Buzzard,' I said, trying my best to seem like I wasn't surprised by what had just happened and that she was in our yard, sitting in one of our wicker chairs. 'They're really rare, especially around here.'

She didn't respond. A long moment passed as I stood there awkwardly and she, for all I could tell, just stared off into the distance.

'It was wrong of you not to come to the funeral,' she said finally, her hand gesturing for me to sit.

I took the chair beside her, unable to think of anything to say that would excuse my absence from Danny's burial.

'I'm sorry,' I said quietly, frightened that she might lose control again. 'I just couldn't.'

'I almost couldn't go myself,' she said, making a small understanding nod. 'The pain was almost too much for me to bear. I know it must have been the same for you.'

She turned her shaded eyes toward me and smiled sadly.

I nodded back at her, then looked out to where the buzzard still circled silently. But what she'd said wasn't true. I'd barely noticed Danny's death. It'd happened during the spring holidays. Nearly a week had gone by before I realised I hadn't seen him for a while. Then, on the first day back at school, the principal made an announcement that Danny had passed away. That's why I didn't go to the funeral, not because I was too grief stricken, but because I hadn't missed him.

'Modeste, I –'

'There's no need to explain, honey. I understand. You're a sensitive boy, too sensitive for funerals.'

She patted me on the hand and then squeezed it before letting it go.

My stomach squirmed, urging me to tell her the truth, but I just couldn't admit to her that not only was I not grieving for her son, I hadn't even liked him.

'Would you like a cup of tea, Modeste?' I asked, needing to get out of her presence for a while.

‘Oh yes, honey’ she answered, ‘yes I would.’

I went into the house to make the tea. Once inside, I leant against the kitchen wall, my knees shaking, thinking, It’s okay, calm down, she doesn’t know. She doesn’t know. When I took the tea back out, she had removed her sunglasses and was looking up into the canopy of the willow. Shafts of sunlight fell down through the leaves onto her face, so that freckles of golden light danced on her cheeks, on her dark lips.

‘Such a beautiful tree,’ she said as I passed her the cup. ‘Back home, willows are rare. But there is one just like this, in the garden of an old plantation near Kingston. I know about it because it’s haunted.’

‘Haunted? A tree?’

‘A Weeping Willow, yes. It’s haunted by the ghost of a little boy. They say that if you listen to the sound of the wind blowing in the leaves of that tree, you can hear the boy crying for his mother.’

She looked up into the branches again, perhaps thinking that this willow was also haunted, by her dead son. But the willow’s leaves were motionless and silent, the air totally still.

I looked into her eyes and knew that we were both hoping for the same thing – for Danny’s spirit to return. I knew though that Modeste’s hope and mine were of a different kind. Modeste hoped for Danny’s return purely to be comforted. I hoped for it so that his ghost might somehow alleviate my guilt.

‘That little boy was murdered,’ she continued, ‘right at the foot of that tree. He was the son of a maid who lived on the plantation. Even though he was only 6 years old, his mother used to send him into town to sell plantains from her garden. After one of those trips, a man followed him home and did mischief on him. They found the boy’s body beneath that big old willow. Of course, everyone blamed the mother. They said it was neglect and whispered about what kind of mother sends such a little boy into town all alone.’

She looked at me as if expecting an answer to the question. I shrugged.

‘A poor mother,’ she whispered, ‘a mother with no other choice, that’s what kind.’

Tears welled in her eyes. She wiped them away with a slow finger.

‘But I don’t have that excuse. I’m not poor.’

What was she saying?, I wondered, then looked into her pained eyes and understood.

‘But, Modeste, it’s not your fault that Danny died.’

She smiled weakly, looking out over the cornfield and the yellow hills beyond. The buzzard was circling higher now, so high that its shadow had vanished. She wiped at her eyes again and took a slow breath.

‘Oh, I know that,’ she said, her voice cracking a little. ‘But I neglected him. I should have been more patient with him. I shouldn’t have got so annoyed with him all the time.’

‘Danny loved you,’ I said.

Although he had never actually said that to me, I was sure that it was true. Boys don't say such things, but they do feel them, and I was certain that Danny had.

'That makes it all the worse,' she said in a tremulous voice. 'I wasn't a good mother to Danny. That is killing me.'

She stifled a sob. Her hands were shaking fully now. She rested the tea cup in her lap to avoid it spilling. She looked up into the high branches of the willow again and took another deep breath.

'I loved Danny,' she continued after a moment, 'and it's true that he loved me back. Maybe I did my best. But now that he's gone, I don't know what to do with myself. You see, although I loved my boy, I don't love his father.'

She sighed then, and finally took a sip of her tea.

'I only married him because I was pregnant. I would never have considered him for a husband otherwise. As Danny grew in my belly, I grew into a wife and mother. Now that Danny is gone,' she subconsciously placed a trembling hand on her belly, 'I don't know who I am.'

She cast me an imploring glance. I didn't know what to say, so I resorted to telling her that she'd be alright.

'You think so, honey?' she asked. 'You think I'll be alright? I'm not so sure. I've been here ten years. It was my husband who wanted us to come to Australia. I didn't want to leave Jamaica. But he didn't listen, so we came here when Danny was four years old. Danny was more an Australian boy than a Jamaican one by the end. This country doesn't mean anything to me without him. He gave this place meaning for me.'

She gestured out to the hills and the broad sky.

'Now that he's gone, I just don't know how to *be* here, in this strange place, so far from my home. I don't even know how to be with my husband anymore.'

She sipped at her tea, tears still glistening in her eyes.

'When my boy died,' she continued, 'it was like that part of me that was a mother, and a wife, died as well, and this place has become nothing more than a graveyard.'

I couldn't say anything. What could I say to that? My understanding of the feelings she'd expressed was slight. I understood one thing, though. She and I both felt guilt over Danny's death. Knowing that eased mine. I wondered if telling her that I'd never really liked Danny, that I had always preferred her, would ease hers. Given Modeste's state of mind, it was a risky idea. Before I could make a decision, she made it for me.

'It comforts me that you and Danny were such good friends,' she said, putting her tea down and taking my hand. 'I'm thankful that you knew each other. Danny was lucky to have a friend like you. And so am I.'

She paused, then continued.

'You might think it strange, but you are the only person I can talk to. I can't tell my husband these things, and I don't have any other friends. I suppose I should be

ashamed to call a fourteen-year-old boy a friend. But you know what, I'm not ashamed at all. Do you think I should be?'

'No,' I answered. 'There's nothing to be ashamed of. I am your friend, even though I'm only fourteen.'

'Good,' she said, smiling properly now, 'we can be shameless together.'

She squeezed my hand again. I felt that she was squeezing my heart at the same time. I smiled and turned toward the dry paddock to watch the buzzard, circling so high now that I could barely see him.

Modeste may not have been ashamed, but I was. Not of our friendship, I could never be ashamed of that, but of the fact that I kept my true feelings about Danny secret. Keeping that secret inevitably poisoned our relationship. Being around her made me uncomfortable, especially when the topic of her dead son came up, which was all the time. I didn't know what to say to her anymore. I felt that the part of me that knew how to be her friend died with Danny.

Before long, I was avoiding her. I could tell that this confused Modeste, but she never said anything. She was too hurt, or proud, or both, to ask a fourteen-year-old why he didn't want to spend time with her.

Less than a year later I heard that she'd left her husband and gone back to Jamaica. My mother told me about it while we were packing to move house again. As soon as she said the words, my heart stopped for a moment. When it started to beat again, I ran out into the yard, to the huge willow, fighting an overwhelming urge to cry.

I dropped into my mother's wicker chair and looked up through the leaves to the sun above, just as Modeste had done on that day she'd come looking for Danny's ghost. I closed my eyes, wanting to feel the warm sunlight dance on my eyelids. I needed to feel something beautiful, something other than guilt and loneliness.

As I sat there, my eyes shut tight against coming tears, a breeze picked up, making the long branches of the willow move and sigh. I opened my eyes to see a bank of clouds moving in fast from the South, growing larger and darkening as it came overhead. The weather is finally going to break, I thought. No, I am finally going to break. The breeze strengthened into a fierce wind, causing the willow to bend and moan, as if alive. Then another sound, barely audible, joined in with the sighing of the wind. I couldn't tell if it was coming from the wind or the tree or from somewhere within me. My hair stood on end as I realised it was the sound of a boy, the sound of a crying boy.

About a year later we moved away, and soon after that Willowhaven burnt to the ground. The fire started with a lightning strike. If it weren't for the rickety fence there would be no evidence that anyone ever lived there, that in that acre-large yard a lonely boy and a grieving mother had once sat in wicker chairs hoping to see a ghost. The yard is now empty but for dry grass and the willow, tall and solitary on the slope; the only sign of life for miles around a Black-breasted Buzzard circling high overhead.

Research statement

Research background

This work of semi-autobiographical Gothic fiction explores ideas about mourning espoused by Jacques Derrida (1996, 2001) who argued that mourning is an affective state that is non-responsive to rational or theoretical ideas. This reflects Michel Foucault's approach to the state of repression, which he argued cannot be addressed by a theoretical discourse alone (1978: 5). Therefore this work takes a creative rather than theoretical approach. The work explores Derrida's (2001) notion that mourning is triggered not only by the death of a loved one, but also by the death of that aspect of ourselves that existed only in relationship to the deceased.

Research contribution

This work makes an original contribution by describing and illustrating ideas around the affective state of mourning in a creative rather than theoretical way. The work aims to produce new knowledge by deploying creative writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson 2000) into mourning. The work disseminates that knowledge around notions of mourning in the form of a creative rather than theoretical narrative.

Research significance

The work is innovative in exploring Derrida's (1996, 2001) theoretical ideas about mourning in the context of creative writing as a form of inquiry (Richardson 2000). It is also a wholly original creative and critical work in the Gothic genre.

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