

Deakin University

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The growth

Biographical note:

Antonia Pont is Lecturer in Professional and Creative Writing and Literary Studies at Deakin University. She publishes short fiction, poetry and theoretical prose, and researches practice-in-itself, or practice *per se*, seeking to distill the criteria that mark all forms of practice, including those of artistic engagement, quotidian commitments, and other forms of intentional non-doing that court radical but stable change.

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heterosexuality

The itch, at first, was unremarkable.

She was in the queue at the supermarket. Her basket reflected the contents of her list – toilet paper, plastic screw-top food containers, and a three-pack of clear, flimsy shower caps. She was standing behind a man with a large, cumbersome shoulder-bag, and a woman – perhaps his sister or wife – who had thinning hair on the back of her scalp, disguised with careful brushing and spray.

She brought a hand to her eye – a dry-skinned, office-day, air-conditioned hand – and rubbed into the soft pink flesh of the inner corner, into the part which, when inflamed, can creep out over the white of the bulb. It felt hot. She suspected the beginnings of hay-fever, since the sky lately had been etched through with those tiny seed mechanisms that carry a tree's genetics with the wind.

She rubbed, but nothing grit-like came away. Her knuckle, too, stayed dry. This was unusual, since when it's hayfever, everything usually runs-runs saline.

When the checkout attendant called *Next!*, she carried her modest shop over to the counter, postponing for the moment any worrying at her socket.

There was a recall on the shower caps. Apparently their constituent substances had been deemed a sudden threat to the consumer. When the attendant went to place her other two items in a plastic bag, she indicated she'd rather carry them and, after paying, left the register.

The rolls and containers were ungainly to manage but she didn't have far to walk. Out in the early night, the sky was magician's blue. She walked briskly, feeling all the while the stubborn itch in the inside corner of her left eye.

Her armpits prickled, then softened to moisture.

She'd had conjunctivitis as a teenager. There was a faded school photo somewhere of her holding a shy, concealing hand to her temple. Washes and then something orally, if she wasn't confusing it with some other ailment. In any case, an icky phase. And she remembered how ugly she'd felt in those weeks – at school, when it mattered to be consistently well-groomed every day – with a halo of sweet body-spray and socks managed fashionably. She hoped it wasn't conjunctivitis.

Her partner was waiting for her at home. He opened the door, only to be nudged out of the way by John Deer, their adolescent Great Dane. The human male, beaming welcome, took the items out of her arms; she fussed with shoes in the cramped space.

'Are you okay?' he asked. 'Were they polite to you down there?'

'Hmmm. Yes, fine...'

She noticed the floor needed a sweep.

'Sinister shower caps. Balding lady. Otherwise, all in order.'

She smiled far up at him, since he was the homo sapien equivalent of John Deer.

When she'd scrambled up to standing, he cupped her face in his slightly calloused hands and moved in close to nose-nuzzle her. Suddenly he reared back.

'Oi, milady. You have one seriously red eye going on there. Like you've been on the tipple, but only your left half.'

She touched towards the spot that was now itching ferociously, like a miniature set of jaws, gnawing into her face. Dismissing a sudden odd feeling, she shouldered past him, failing in the meantime to acknowledge JD, who sat back onto his haunches – in tragic protest sulk.

In the kitchen, something rocky was playing. She turned the dial down on the amplifier, not sure if the playlist was the source of her sudden unease.

'Sorry,' he said, following her into the lit room, 'was motivating myself to do dishes.'

'No problem,' she said. 'Shall we get the dinner on?'

'You mean, call *Taj Palace*?'

'Yup,' she nodded, restraining herself from touching at her face, '... exactly.'

She walked into the bathroom, then. Looking for the cold tap.

When she pulled back the curtain beside their bed the next morning, the day was already a violent, perfect blue. She hated that kind of weather, but had never known why. She'd recently decided to stop telling people this, since it began very predictable conversations about her antisocial weather preferences, and frankly, it put everybody in an awkward mood.

Blue skies. She found them onerous. Threatening. Nigh horrifying.

He was still sleeping, and for once, John Deer wasn't moshing the door down. Her hand went automatically to her face, and she didn't have time to stop it. When her fingers encountered new membrane, she drew in a wee gasp.

It must have woken him, for he let out a faint, sweet complaint-moan.

Climbing from the bed too suddenly, she swayed into the mantelpiece, before righting her torso in front of the mirror. Her finger was palpating, very gingerly, a considerable thing that had grown in the night.

She pulled both eyes wide, or the left one as wide as it could manage. Was it a blister? It was paler than her normal skin. Like a burgeoning nub of mushroom, almost, and she thought of Plath's little 'fists'. It was perfectly stretched over itself, pulled orb-tight and evenly coloured. It would have been worthy of aesthetic contemplation if it hadn't been wedged between the bridge of her nose and her eye, stuck like a clean, fat pearl right onto her face.

She turned to him, who was now sitting dead upright in bed.

‘I can see it,’ he said. ‘Good lord, glad you didn’t bring those shower caps home.’

‘So right-funny at all the *wrong* times...’ and she pressed in closer to the glass.

It was a facial pet. She couldn’t take her eyes off it. Her home-grown head-fungi.

‘Does it hurt?’ he asked.

She turned her head from side to side. Peered up inside her nostrils for a second.

‘Nup.’

He nodded like an actor.

She went on, ‘Or, not hurt, as such. But it feels a bit pressured. You know. Like blisters do.’

‘What do you want to do?’ he asked.

She turned around and drew open the curtains fully. Forced herself to look out properly at the sky. Blue. Blue. Not even a blue that one could like very much. Not enough navy. Not enough slate. It was dumb-blonde blue.

‘I’d like to have breakfast,’ she said, and left the room.

The next morning, which was Saturday, it was bigger. She stood at the mirror again and this time, they didn’t bother with a conversation about it. They’d had plans to go to his parents’ house in the outer suburban ring. His mum would cook a silverside, and his dad would cajole them all into a round of table tennis, terry-towelling wrist bands included.

A quick phone-call postponed the visit. The blister wasn’t painful – ‘just a bit pressured...’ His mother, basically, wasn’t someone who coped well with signs of illness or deformity.

So they stayed home, and to her relief, around four o’clock, the belligerent blue from the day before gave way to a baritone cascade of grindings and crashes. A storm coming through that put her in a thoroughly sexy mood.

She’d been lying on the couch, trying to read something complicated but also in moments so conceptually enthralling that it made her squirm down into her hips. He was tackling a taffy recipe, and using his new sugar thermometer that she’d found in a sale bin. The kitchen oozed the warm smell of sweetness boiling. She went and stood behind him as he poured the stuff onto the oiled slab to cool and, sliding her arms around his pelvis, unbuttoned his jeans.

You’ll be the death of this taffy, he breathed, chin lifting.

And he let her hold him until he was hard and then they spent the next couple of hours making love to the sounds of insistent rain on tin and the occasional whinny of sheet light. With her new organ-in-residence, it felt like a threesome, but she kept that quip to herself.

She worked in the city and had her own office. It was a windowless affair, and very expensive, but for her line of work it was an evil necessity, and so she filled the paltry atmosphere with cut flowers and photos of him and John Deer. She sometimes burned a salt lamp that a close friend had given her. It was one of those pink ones you put little tea lights inside. She was not at all new-agey, but she reckoned the salt lamp did something. Negative ions, it said on Google. *Whatever works*, she'd thought.

She took the train always, keeping her push-bike for weekends. Corporate-wear doesn't fare so well in the honk-and-sweat of a morning commute.

'You sure you wanna go?'

He was still in his pyjamas, getting ready for a day at the home-office.

'Course! I got shit to do, ya'know?'

Her feigned brashness was a cover for the sheer frock of denial she was currently sporting. She knew he could read it.

'Want a lift, at least?' he tried, quietly.

'That is *über* sweet of you,' she tossed, 'but I'm good. Need my fix of people-ogging ... and all that.'

'It will be *you*, I suspect,' he offered, '... who'll be the ogglee.'

She conceded with a monosyllable, fingering the large eye-wear she'd chosen, and resisting the urge to pet the translucent foetus coming to term on her face.

Once at work, she slipped past the secretary, who was – one could be certain of it – following all-and-sundry on some kind of social networking site, and avoiding cleaning up her computer desk-top, or doing other constructive tasks.

Morning, Rachel! and by then she had already closed her timber door, and ripped off the glasses. They were hurting her ears. She opened her already turned-on laptop, and pulled up that program that allows you to take photos from the in-built web-cam and which serves quite nicely as a mirror.

The thing seemed to have grown since she'd left the house. It was technically past the middle of her eye, and sat like a water-balloon heavy against her nose. Still clean-white. A milky, opaque white. She wondered what was inside. She thought of those people who have an almost erotic urge to squeeze pimples, and decided she qualified as porn. *1-beep-2-beep-3-flash*. She had the mirror make a photo. Evidence was in her line of business, after all.

Around eleven, she conceded that the glasses were not going to work on the trip home.

Jabbing at the lit boxes of her phone, she wrote: *please come get me at 6.15. train is not going to be okay. xx*

He answered quickly: *am there*.

She worked for the rest of the day as best she could. It still didn't hurt but was simply ungainly. It was now large and un-ignorable. It was not documented on any of the medical sites that she consulted during her self-assigned, forty-five minute lunch break. She ate her left-over creamy pasta and rocket leaves, meanwhile flicking through blog after blog about horrific things that happen to people's bodies.

Graphic.

Her little face-foetus, however, didn't get a mention. *Very reassuring*, she muttered, while simultaneously changing her screen-saver to the single, typed word: 'HYSTERICAL'.

Right on schedule, she heard him arrive in the reception area, providing a predictable distraction for Rachel, who seemed uncharacteristically to want to do overtime that day.

'Watcha surfing?' she heard him inquire.

She could imagine Rachel chewing a glossy lip, doing bored-coquette.

Just following certain pee-pull ... and the last word with the odious whiff of amateur stalker about it. Actually, she couldn't hear them, but she grabbed her chance.

Behind his large back, she slipped out via the glass doors and prayed that her colleagues were still in their rooms or had already left. She hadn't bothered with the sunglasses. It was a liminal moment.

That night, even he was getting edgy.

'Babe...'

'Fuck. I know it's dire when you call me *babe*.'

'Sorry. Listen, I know you seem fine, but this is getting weird-town. I'm slightly worried, and no, I don't think hospitals are safe places either. *Golden staph*, or whatever it's called. But, you've got to admit, this is serious. I mean, you could make us a fortune in tabloid news or talk-shows ...'

She appreciated the humorous punchline, because she didn't want this to turn into a veiled fight. Not that he was a fighter much. He was too responsible. Owned up to stuff. Didn't speak for her, blah blah. If he wasn't such a hotty, it could almost get boring. Or that's what she'd have thought, once upon a time, and now knew better.

'I mean, look at it.' He wore a pained look, one he didn't bring out often.

She turned to the window. It was black-black outside, and there were faint sirens in the distance. He was playing something Frenchy, but tasteful. She could see her face superimposed against the nightblur of the side path. Ephemeral features. The growth, she was ready to admit, was beyond considerable.

‘Yeah, sure. I know, but this doesn’t feel bad. I know it *looks* bad. But I feel good. Better even. You know how I was a bit under the weather for a few months there. Never getting really sick, but never feeling one hundred percent. Well, I feel clearer. Lighter. Except for my face...’ She tried a grin towards him, but he wasn’t softening.

‘... let’s just wait. If you can bear it. Bear *me*. I may end up very disfigured, but maybe I won’t. We can have sex in the dark, if that helps.’

‘Having sex always helps,’ he agreed, and came over to scoop her unsuccessfully up into a bundle that toppled him back onto the couch.

‘Ouch,’ he moaned, feigning lumbago. But she was grateful.

‘So, we’ve got the posh ice-creams still. Which one do you want, and how many scoops of each?’

He was straining to maintain the levity. His partner of six years had something seriously kook growing out of her face. He worked in creative industries, but this was probably stretching even his capacity for ‘innovative reframing’. She was often right about things. Was it the moment to remind him of that?

They fell into silence as she moved about the kitchen. Familiar. Herself. She was still the same. Completely the same. She knew he was watching.

In the laundry, at the deep-freezer, he reached an arm down into the cold interior and a billow of chilled fog slipped up around him like a wraith.

So, he is not unafraid, she thought. But if he can just wait a little longer.

‘Hello, Rachel ... Yes, oh ... good to hear it. Listen, just wanting to let you know that I’m going to be working from home for a couple of days. Please call if it’s necessary, but otherwise mail me through anything relevant ... or send a courier. Home address. Good. Yes, that’s fine. Talk then.’

She said prayers of gratitude that she was lucky enough to manage her own time. Many did not have the privilege.

They weren’t used to being in the house together on weekdays. Normally it was his space as soon as she zoomed out the door of a morning. He went all self-conscious.

‘Ah, tea? I’m making one...’

‘Listen, just do what you normally do. I’ll muddle through. If I look lost, I probably am, so ignore me.’

Her appendage, as they had begun to call it, had continued its push for world domination, and was now larger than her left eye. She’d lost a little depth of field, walked into the table edge twenty times on that first day at home.

At night in bed, with the sheets kicked back, he traced a finger around the splodge of bruise that was forming on her thigh.

‘Collateral damage,’ he ventured, lightly.

But then his eyes drifted to the book on the side table.

She stared up at the ceiling. Up that long way into the white they’d painted together six months earlier. She rubbed her feet like two seal flippers, like children do to get comfort, wondering all the while about dogs for the blind. About how blind people always get pitied, food down her front, and how that would really piss her off. She imagined that he hadn’t been looking her in the eye – literally – for the last couple of days.

‘Hey there ...’ she tried.

He closed the book around his finger. Only pausing. She felt about as sexy as a burnt piece of toast that you need to scrape the black off.

‘Yeah ...’ giving her his full attention.

‘Nothing.’

The following Friday, he took her for a drive. Any weekday attempt at working had – for both of them – become a farce.

Several years earlier, they’d had the windows of their car darkly tinted. She’d always had a thing about direct light and sitting in traffic and arms and hands: that searing, frightening feeling. As they slid into the front seats, she attempted a joke about ‘brilliant foresight’. (It fell flat.) Then her mind slid to *foreskin*, and she wondered if his had too.

Coverings. Cauls. The membranes around fetuses.

There’d been an article in *Time* about harnessing the energy of water across concentration gradients. Invisible membranes made of difference ... The title had been something like: ‘The power of osmosis ...’

They drove without conversation for at least an hour.

At the sea, she was all ready just to look out, through the salt-spatterery windscreen, now littered with bug-guts. She was prepared to huddle there, without the smell, and without the exposure to air she knew she wanted.

He motioned her out with a flick of the head. Stern, no words.

Weeping rattily, she unpacked heavy, defeated limbs from under the glove-box.

They trundled to the viewing platform, and the sea was a wild, dark soup – treacherous and consoling. She imagined that the salt air stung the ever-stretching, unblemished surface of her *thing*, but she couldn’t guarantee that she had feeling in that ‘skin’, if it were skin at all.

No one else came. And she was thankful that the wind howled the way she couldn’t quite.

(Part 1 of two parts)

Research statement

Research background

This work can be situated within a fiction tradition coming primarily out of North America, represented by authors such as Lorrie Moore and Don DeLillo. Moore's work often depicts eloquent, slightly jaded, and marooned university-educated protagonists, who wield wit intentionally (often as a defence against their circumstances) and employ parody as a quotidian mode of communication, thereby unsettling certain attachments to authenticity, while evoking tenderness and intimacy in unexpected ways. From within this stylistic lineage, 'The growth' – an Australian narrative – takes magical realist (veering towards surrealist) tropes, deploying them in a 'world' that otherwise resembles the smooth, self-reflective urban universe of the upper-middle, creative classes.

Research contribution

Given this context, the driving query of the work involves the politics of action and waiting. Recognising the imperative in late-capitalism to produce, do, keep busy and respond precipitously, the narrative attempts to stage the strangeness of choosing to wait – in the absence of reliable information indicating any constructive path. The plot involves the counter-intuitive mechanism of resisting happenings (at one level) but stages waiting's own vectors that may lead to outcomes less violent than interference. This accompanies my scholarly, philosophical research that uses Badiouian ontology to conceptualise events that really constitute 'something happening' as opposed to the deceptive flurry concealing the status quo's stasis.

Research significance

This work contributes to the project 'Conversation strains' that interrogates the role of conversation in contemporary fiction, and the 'telling' shown by dialogue in an historical moment so versed in cinematic consumption. Other works in this series have been published in *Meanjin* and *AntiTHESIS* journals.

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