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Took to the sky: drawing as memory as nonfiction

Biographical note:

Dr Francesca Rendle-Short is a writer, an associate professor in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University, and Co-Director of nonfictionLab Research Group and WrICE (Writers Immersion Cultural Exchange) program. She is the author of the critically acclaimed memoir-cum-novel *Bite your tongue* (Spinifex Press), shortlisted for the 2012 Colin Roderick Literary Award, and has had essays, articles and poetry published in *The 2013 Best Australian Science Writing* (NewSouth), *Killing the Buddah*, *Rabbit*, *TEXT Journal*, *Axon*, *Overland*, *Bumf* and other journals. With David Carlin, she co-edited the *TEXT Special Issue: Nonfiction Now* (2013). Francesca was the recipient of the 2013 International Writers Fellowship to the University of Iowa Nonfiction Writing Program in the United States. Her website is www.francescarendleshort.com

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Drawing is an ongoing mirror, at once both kinaesthetic and physical, involving balance, rhythm, speed (or slowness), sense of direction – strength, subtlety, grace – all the physical cues we get from the world that allow us to judge the efficacy of our actions.

(Dubovsky 2008: 72)

Prologue

My father died in 2010 of Alzheimer's disease. On his death certificate it reads, cause of death: 1. Cerebrovascular accident 6 days 2. Alzheimer's disease 10 years.

Alzheimer's disease is characterised by neurofibrillary tangles and beta-amyloid plaques full of amino acid peptides present in the brain tissue. As doctors will tell you, if asked, the amyloid plaques are found between the neurons in the cerebral cortex, and the neurofibrillary tangles are found inside them. As the disease progresses, the brain changes, nerve cells are damaged and eventually die. As discussed elsewhere (Rendle-Short forthcoming) Alzheimer's is a state of atrophy, negation. Not thinking right, degeneration – *un-memory*. The brain's white and grey matter cells turn black and the cortex shrivels up and the brain shrinks in size. A person with Alzheimer's slowly loses their memory, they forget and forget *and forget*. It can turn happy-go-lucky characters into angry monsters that require sedation, or as in the case of my father, turn his hard-line authoritarianism and no-give nonsense into sweetness. His deterioration allowed me to come closer, in measures, one drawing at a time. In truth, Alzheimer's gave my father heart.

My father was a father. He was a medical man, a sailor, not a cook's cook but a cook of nearly-ripe mango chutney and sticky sweet-sour cumquat marmalade made in those large hot aluminium pots; a paediatrician, a physician, a good sort people say – your father was a good man, they always tell me – a Man of God with capital Ms and capital Gs. He was a man who loved his views – who would do anything to get a good one – who was tickled pink when he and my mother bought their plot of burial ground near Bli Bli, Nambour, Queensland, on a slope, facing east. Today, that's where he lies on top of her, head to toe – my mother first, buried more deeply, and him coming four years later. You'd have to agree, he's the one with the better outlook.

My father loved to listen to his Angel, my mother, playing hymns on the upright Bechstein piano we had in Brisbane (not the Broadwood grand she played in Sheffield) – *Angel do keep playing, play our favourites*. She loved them too, especially those from the Presbyterian Hymnal.

Pure, unbounded love Thou art
Visit us with Thy salvation

My father was a reader and a writer. He liked to annotate texts. When he slowly lost his memory from Alzheimer's disease, my father would sometimes try to read what we had all written in his visitor's books sitting on the bookcase in his room in the nursing home. My father wrote the last sentences to his life as a set of annotations to

those books in the same way he annotated his bibles when, as a Young Earth Creationist, he wrote his young-earth arguments into the margins of the Indian paper pages. These phrases and comments in the visitor's book are the final words he uttered in any semi-coherent way, written in his nearly illegible writing, unless you count his final murmurs and mutterings and sighs before he died, utterances of an unearthly, yet sublime kind.

My father.

My as in *mi* m-i, possessive pronoun, related to *myo* from the Greek *mus*, of muscle and muscles: and father *pater*.



This is my father going to work. What was he thinking that day, head bowed, hand clutching his briefcase? About those small children he was going to inspect at the children's hospital on his ward rounds, hoping they had improved, were on the mend? Was he thinking diagnoses and prognoses, what he was going to say to the parents, the mothers usually, who would have roomed in with their sick children overnight (my father was a pioneer of the concept of rooming-in with astounding results, everyone said, as was his notion of treating 'the whole child')?

Or was he thinking about that book he was working on, *Man, ape or image: the Christian's dilemma* that would be published three years later by Creation Science Publishing in Queensland (Rendle-Short 1981)? Was he thinking through a particular argument he was trying to make in his head and get right, such as the problem of Eve, her being evil and giving in and how she must be mastered? Or how to deal with homosexuality once and for all (little did he know a few years later two lesbians would turn up amongst his daughters)? Or the problem of sickness and evil and where

disability fitted into God's creation plan? (In a recent obituary (Pearn 2013), a colleague wonders at the apparent paradox, him being a modern scientific clinician on the one hand and a literal truth Creationist on the other.)

I didn't like my father but it's true I did like to chase him around the house to take photographs of him with my Instamatic – 'Father going to work', 'Father reading *Time* at the kitchen table under the fan', 'Father typing his books up with his typewriter on his knees in the lounge room'. That sort of thing: these images as witness. I would have been 16 or 17 at the time, my father 41 years older.



My father thought the things his children did were frivolous, especially the more arty ones he fathered (and grandfathered for that matter) – writers, painters, musicians. Nothing compared to his important work. His work of God written into the margins of his bible, a bible now in my possession: 'John Rendle-Short Pine Mountain October 1986'.

If you have a look at the beginning, at the Book of Genesis for example, you'll see here his mind at work, his thinking in the tiny notes written up and down the margins of the pages, starting with this declaration:

I MUST ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT THE ENGLISH BIBLE
CAME TO US FROM A CRUCIBLE OF TERROR. DO NOT
MEDDLE WITH IT.

The Book of Genesis, all 50 chapters, is the most crowded of all the pages in his bible. It is as if he could never get past it, to read further, to study the other 65 books of the bible to see how they compare. It so clearly demonstrates his persistence of argument that if only we understood Genesis we'd all be saved, so-called Christians among us too – he was an ardent Creation Evangelist.

Have a close look: tiny writing and cross references against different verses – chapter and verse, verse after verse after verse, underlinings of pointers and phrases, transcribing of key words as a way of reiterating the point, notes to self and summary notations – all in different coloured inks depending on the pen he was using and in different scripts too, depending on the day he was writing and the sort of mood of mind he was in. There was so much black and blue ink the white space has very nearly disappeared – in strangely parallel progress to that of his Alzheimer's brain. You hear him thinking out loud, word by word:

- Firmament from *vulgate* (Latin) expanse, not solid, a thin layer
- Evil flourishes when the godly compromise
- morning, therefore must be 24hrs

- The Flood is the proof that God is a will to be ACTIVE in the world. He will not allow it forever to go on its evil way
- If flood only local, why did not God tell Noah to migrate.

He abbreviated words for shorthand. He asked himself questions such as who was Cain's wife? Is 'Fetus' life or property? He capitalised words for emphasis such as the MERCY SEAT, START OF GOVERNMENT, and COVENANT. He crossed things out that he'd written in his own notes: Sodom started the ~~war~~ [crossed out] battle. And crossed out words printed in the bible to substitute with his own: 'Cursed ~~be~~ [crossed out] is Canaan.'

The annotations are so personal, I feel my father breathing behind me, breathing close, over my shoulder. I can smell him there. Notes and glossaries in drawings all over my skin. I can almost hear his heart beating – *skopein stethos* – he's that close.

- Its stars, dust, sand in number. I am one of those stars, grains of sand (not dust). More of dust. To dust return. One day shine like the stars.

I feel his hand and fingers running over the well thumbed, yellowing pages as I smooth them down, soft and pliable, straining to read his oh-so-very-small handwriting and illegible lettering.

- The Tree of Life now only to be approached in God's way, God's time. Not just to the sensual pleasures of the Garden.
- Not in Sodom. O, no. Horrid city.

Sometimes I don't really know what he means, I can only guess.

- The angels will suspect creation = not chaotic but lovely.

My father was a father. He loved good cheese, soft cheese, blue cheese: the smellier the bluer the better. And strawberries: my father loved strawberries, sugar and strawberries, strawberries dipped in sugar and cake and cakes and grapes and grapes covered in sugar.

For this drawing exercise, 'Took to the sky', I am adapting Anthony Dubovsky's essay 'The euphoria of the everyday' for my purposes (2008). I am doing this both spatially and methodologically: his daily practice of drawing like a journal, his looking and his seeing, his noting with marginal inscriptions. 'Yes, we can tell stories with drawings: they have elements of grammar and syntax ... A drawing invented in its own making' (Dubovsky 2008: 72, 74). I am parsing my father through these annotations, drinking my own ink, eating my own lead pencil.

Draw what you see.

'Just because you have *looked* at something,' Jennifer Roberts says on the power of patience, 'doesn't mean that you have *seen* it' (2013).

Don't draw what you *think* you see, I tell myself; don't draw what you think you *should* see. Don't draw what you *think* you are *thinking* you see, also. And certainly don't draw what you think a drawing should look like. This is not wish-drawing.

Draw nonfiction Francesca. Draw positive and negative space. Draw truth – whatever she looks like, whatever your perception of it is. Draw what is there – draw an *is-drawing*.

So I draw my father as memory; I draw poetry: 'Hold on, hold on, it's been good to know you' (Berger 2011: 157).

Draw: and you shall remember.

As Sylvia Plath says of drawing: 'It is as if, by concentrating on the "inscape", as Hopkins says, of leaf and plant and animal, I can know the world a new and special way; and make up my own version of it' (2013).

Dubovsky insists drawing must be a daily practice, like writing too. Persistence. Ritual. And return. Perhaps too a kind of testing of fate – can you do it again, *and again*? Not to exist until it is drawn. Drawing: *dragen*. Drawing as something given: drawing because, as the American abstract expressionist Philip Guston once said, you never know when the angel will visit. Engage with her, with the angel – the word originally meaning 'to pawn or pledge something' and later 'enter into combat' – and she will deliver, she will give.

Your angel will angel a gift.

Strangely, thinking etymologically, the noun or mass noun of *gift* (mass noun meaning that which cannot be counted) is *medicine* as it happens, the Old High German *gift* the same as 'poison' (Harper 2014).

I draw him writing:

*It's very
complicated
this and that

tracings and
rubblings out
and
erasures and
additions

the skin of this
paper this pdf
making
shapes
making
shapes of
hearing
hearings*

*he was ~~the~~
guardian*

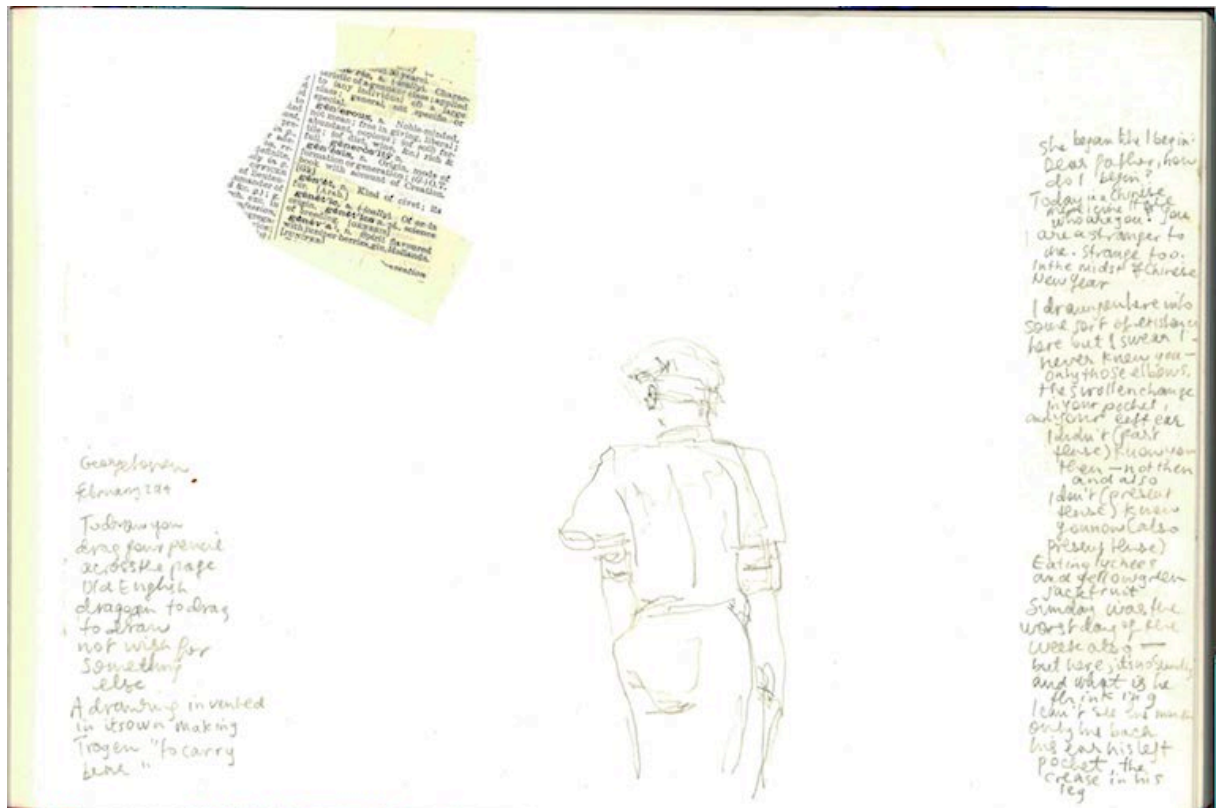
that

and this

I see my father in his white shirtfront coat, with his stethoscope around his neck. I watch him lean down to the sick children in his hospital. I feel him touching their arms to reassure as if he is touching mine.

Dubovsky writes: ‘Our “being” in the world is also a source of knowing’ (2008: 75). All that we are and all that we make can only be a meeting place of moments. As Confucius observes, our understanding of the world – in this case ‘the world’ of my father and my memories of my father – can only be presented in fragments. Still: ‘They are spatial arrangements. They have a geometry’ (Berger 2011: 149). Geometry measured by breath going in, breath going out and the pop pop pop of his fingers pulsing the diaphragm and bell.

1. Going to work





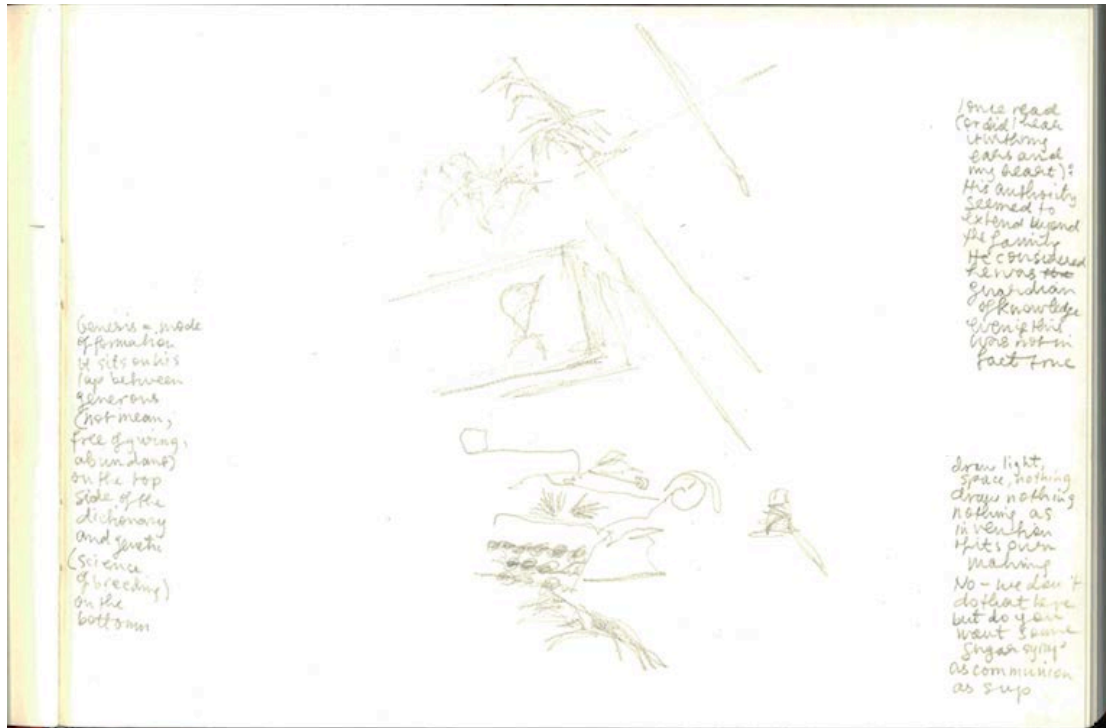
2. Reading TIME magazine





3. *Typing on his knees*





Endnotes

1. All images and drawings by the author

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Research statement

Research background

This creative work contributes to a body of writing and research in nonfiction studies on the ‘vexed subject’ of writing the father (Clark 2008). If we think of nonfiction as inhabiting the realm of doubt and uncertainty – a process of turning ourselves inside out (Carlin and Rendle-Short 2013) to amplify emotional intimacies – ‘Took to the sky’ recalibrates imaginative possibilities to percolate the notion of ‘father’ to make a nonfiction work that traverses drawing and writing. It posits the idea that when we draw what we see, we re-read what we remember; we compose *memory-as-poetry*, drawing in words and marks *as nonfiction*.

Research contribution

The conceit for this meditative work brings together the delicate subject matter of familial relationships and memory. It is speculative, ‘suggestive and beckoning in its specificity’ (Clark 2008: 7); it renders the subject of father as nonfiction in oblique, fresh, nuanced ways. It gestures to the reader to consider their own father-as-fragment; also how they might ‘draw’ their father on the page into some sort of existence.

Research significance

‘Took to the sky’ tests the porosity of writing and drawing disciplines, the relationship of memory to nonfiction, and ignites creative synergies between different practices. It builds on a series of thematic creative works contributing to the author’s research as a creative academic under ERA: ‘A field guide to writing a father’ (*Overland* 2009), ‘My father’s body’ (*The Best Australian Science Writing* 2013). This current work was critiqued and developed during a research project in Penang, Malaysia, funded by Copyright Agency: WrICE (Writers Immersion and Cultural Exchange).

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