

Independent researcher and writer

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Clay lips and love

Biographical note:

Julia Prendergast has a PhD in Writing and Literature. Julia is a short fiction addict. Her stories have been longlisted, shortlisted and published in a range of international and national publications and competitions: *Glimmer Train* (USA), *Lightship Anthology 2* (UK), Séan Ó Faoláin Competition (IE), *Review of Australian Fiction*, *Australian Book Review's* Elizabeth Jolley Prize, Josephine Ulrick Prize and *TEXT* (all AU). Julia's theoretical work has also been published in national and international journals including *TEXT*, *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, *Current Narratives* and *Testimony Witness Authority: The Politics and Poetics of Experience*.

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Yesterday I dug a hole for him, yesterday and most of the night. My palms are blistered. I am grateful for the rawness, burning and throbbing like cracked nipples, keeping sleep at bay, out in the bay. I am frightened to fall asleep because I may dream him, crying and gurgling and calling for me, out in the cold dark wash.

I dug a hole for him near the laundry because it's his favourite place, close to the house, close to the beach ... The afternoon sun catches there, lingering, browning his knobbly knees. The lawn is thick and green and the gusty breeze sweeps his sandy fringe off his face as he plays. His hands are always busy, building something with shells and twigs, stones and pinecones. He blinks and laughs, throwing his head back. He loves to play there. *SORRY*. He *LOVED* to play there. Past tense. How can that be?

I worried that the hole wasn't deep enough, so I set to digging again, blisters bleeding. I dug until the earth was level with my breasts, thinking I would put him into the earth, just as he is, wrapped in a large tartan blanket. But the earth has turned to clay— ugly, thick, wind-less. Teddy loves the wind and I can't put him against clay. Clay does not care for wind. Clay does not care for anything.

What can I put him in? What will I do?

Love means you will do anything. Love means you will do all the things you thought you would never do – cock against your gullet – even if it makes you sicker than vomit and lonely as death, you will do it. That's what love actually means.

I sit on the back step in the charcoal evening light, waiting for Pelts to bring Teddy from the morgue. He parks the car at the side of the house and carries Teddy in, zipped in a bag. Pelts turns sideways to get Teddy in the door. He glances toward the hole, the ugly mound of clay, sticky thick and hopeless under the fluorescent light.

I lead Pelts to Teddy's bed and roll back the covers. He lays Teddy there, gently, and looks at me. *Go*, I say quietly. *Come back just before daylight*.

Pelts speaks slowly. *Shall I take ...*

I interrupt. *She is already asleep*, I say emptily.

I unzip Teddy's head but it's not enough and it was never going to be enough so I unzip everything.

I fill a tub with water, so warm, and I carry the water to Teddy's dead bed. I wash every bit of him: every dip, every nook. I kneel beside him, on the zip bag, and the zip digs into my knees like what might have been.

I dress him in his striped blue pyjamas and I wipe his face, again and again, rubbing extra soap around his neck and face until he smells familiar. His face feels like clay but I try to see beyond what I feel with my own warm hands. I say: *I love you Teddy. I love you very, very much*.

Then I do his voice. I say: *I love you too Mum. I love you with all of my heart*. It sounds wrong. I cry desperately. There's no air.

I walk from room to room, trying to find something to hold him before he goes in the hole. I say *fucken, fucken, FUCKEN-SHITTY-LIFE* and then I say *GET IT TOGETHER RIGHT NOW*. I pour a glass of water and put the kettle on, thinking I'm probably a bit dehydrated from all the digging – nothing to eat, nothing much to drink.

I take the milk out of the fridge to make a cup of tea, but the milk is not cold and it smells wrong. I tip it down the sink, lurching after it, but there is nothing, only lurching and a claycold face. I check the thermostat inside the fridge. Although it is up to the max, the fridge is barely cold. I know immediately that this is where I will put him. Perhaps I knew before now, because the hole seems to have been dug with the fridge in mind. I begin to take the things out: butter, a bruised apple, wilted carrots.

I take the scissors and go back to Teddy, cutting some of his golden hair. I carry it to the kitchen, emptying the tea bags from the box so I can put the hair in there – it looks accidental, like a mistake. I wasn't careful enough about making sure that the box was empty of tea dust and it is a stupid idea anyway, because his hair doesn't smell the same in the box. Nothing smells the same. Nothing is the same.

Smells and images collide. My mind is cluttered like an op-shop. Earl grey tea, the citrus bergamot – Teddy's ashen cheeks. Palmolive soap, wafting freesia – Teddy's sunken eyes. Sour milk, glugging in the plughole – Teddy's bittersweet neck. Tea and soap, milk and skin, simple things have become twisted.

Teddy's eyes look bruised. His lips are purple and closed as if they never opened. He is no longer a soft boy but a painted, rigid doll. The smells are sticking to me; there's no everyday air. I return to the kitchen, filling the sink with hot water, disinfectant and soap. I take the grater and I grate Teddy's soap into the hot, hot water. Then I take out the wire racks and I scrub the inside surfaces of the fridge, bending into the depthless white so that I can smell as I go, so that I can be sure that it smells like him.

I remove the screws that hold the freezer compartment in place, wrenching the freezer section out. I cut the electrical cord with the big kitchen knife, denting the floorboards because the cord is so stubborn. I take some steel wool and scour desperately at the tracks that held the wire shelves in place – wire smells like blood, like a cage or a garden rake, but not like him. The steel wool shaves my blisters like razor blades, like regret. I clean the outside of the fridge as furiously as I have cleaned the inside. I know the fridge will get dirty as soon as it hits the earth but it will be clean first – I will make sure.

I rub Teddy's doona and pillow with a dry cake of soap. I lay the doona on the inside of the fridge to soften it, trying to make it look less like a fridge and more like a bed. I keep the pillowcase because it smells like Teddy's breath. It smells like my darling boy, laughing in the wind. I loop it through my frayed bra strap, bending my head towards it as I work, greedy for his smell.

Then I go and get him, lifting him gently as if he's fallen asleep in the car, as if I'm carrying him inside to bed. As I lay him in the fridge he looks beautiful, superb, too good to be true. If he were any taller he wouldn't fit in the fridge – he is stuck straight

like a cricket bat. My beautiful soft boy – a cricket bat in a broken fridge, dead wood in a fridge coffin.

What am I thinking? Is this real? Am I awake?

I tuck more blankets around him and around him, tight around him, so that he can't wriggle around, so he can't come undone, so that he can't wriggle around when I put him in the ground. I can't cover his face, not yet, not ever in fact so I put more blankets, around him and around him. He looks like a newborn baby, his dear little face poking out of the blankets. It makes time seem like a dream, it makes all of my time with him seem like a wish, something that I wanted too much, so much that I imagined it hard and it seemed real, but it could never be as real as I wanted it to be because he was too good to be true.

I take the large tartan blanket into the kitchen, lifting one corner of the fridge and then the other, wriggling the blanket under the weight of it, inch by inch. I am sweating, crying and moaning, thinking that I will never be able to get the blanket under the fucking weight of that fucking fridge. I consider giving up, taking him out and putting him in the hole just as he is, but then I remember the clay, thick and suffocating as a dead boy's skin.

Lifting the fridge door, I breathe his dear little face, knowing that I will do what I set out to do, for him I can do anything because I love him – fucking-fucking-love – and even if he becomes thick without his smell, and rank, even if I cannot stop it, my hands will not move him closer to the clay.

Once the blanket is under the fridge, I push him and drag him towards the laundry. I stop a minute, my head in my palms, sobbing deep breathless breaths, and for a time there is calmness, some sort of reprieve, a wafting. I know that it is not quite sleep. I can feel his warmth against my chest, panting his precious breath against my neck.

Opening the fridge, I kiss his clay lips. I hold my lips against his and I know that he is too dead to be true. I will get him out to the earth. I will get him near the water where there is wind. Because he loves me, I can do anything.

I open the laundry door so that only the flywire separates me from the backyard grave. I open the fridge and kiss the rubber meat of his lips, stiff and sour raw, room temperature and wrong. I kiss him until the air is thick without smell, like clay against my windpipe. Leaning left of the fridge, I vomit, but nothing comes. I heave and heave and it sounds like an echo because it goes on and on, like ugly love, directionless love, like squally wind.

I lay beside the fridge, on the edge of the tattered tartan blanket. I gasp, on the cusp of sleep. I lift the door and kiss him one last time, holding my lips there without breathing, listening to the smell of him until I know, with raging disgust, that my lips will never touch his again. I can't bear the thought that the fridge will open on the way down so I tie it tight with string, two balls of twine sawing at my open blisters. The blisters weep and bleed like stigmata. I hope they never heal.

Pelts arrives and I realise I have forgotten time. Dawn is an hour away. The light shifts to jaundiced grey as we drag the fridge towards the clay mound. We stand

beside the hole, pulling first and then pushing, heaving. Teddy thumps in head first, on a bit of an angle. It is fast in the end and I land on top of him. My weight against the fridge pushes his bottom half down. I lay there in a trance, eyes wide.

Pelts pulls me out of the hole. I am very dizzy so I lay on the ground, my cheek against the clay. I wonder what happened during the night when time stopped. I want to open the fridge door and see him one last time. I can't believe that he is in there even though I have seen it with my own eyes. I lay on the earth above him, considering how I will prize the fridge door open, but then I worry that I will let some clay in and I STOP, knowing that I must leave him alone in the timeless place.

Putting the earth over him does not feel right. The rest of it I wanted to do, only I could have done it, but putting the earth over him feels wrong, like a sin. I don't believe in sins. I believe in coffins and funerals for the sons of lucky mothers, the beautiful people with money and choices and time for mourning.

I could almost leave Teddy uncovered, except that someone might find him and tamper with him, and that would be worse than covering him with earth.

I pick up a spade. I can cover him with earth because I know that no one can touch him, now or ever again. I know that every last touch on him was from me and I know what those touches were like. Only my mother-hands can touch his rubber clay body with fire-love.

He is covered with earth and I am wracked with chainsaw sobbing. Falling to the ground, I lay my cheek against clay. Pelts carries me inside and lays me in Teddy's bed. He brings the big doona from my room and tucks me in tight like a dead boy. Perhaps I sleep but I am awake too, all the while, because I will never sleep in the old way again. Sleep is gone like earl grey tea. I hear Pelts getting my daughter up and giving her breakfast. I hear it as if I am dreaming someone else's life and I wonder whether my mother-love will survive. In the face of dead love, I wonder if it's possible. Where will the Teddy love go? His love for me is still here too. It feels like clay, suffocating thickness setting in my stomach, but nevertheless it is here.

I sing the bath song from when Teddy was a baby. He would fall asleep in my arms, in the warm bath water. He would cry when I lifted him out because he was cold. I would sing to him so that he knew I was there, so he knew that he would be warm soon. Even as a little boy he would have me sing the bath song as he pulled on his pyjamas. I'd hum it to him when he was sick, patting his forehead, sweeping his fringe away like the gentle wind. He never grew tired of it.

The song has nothing to do with the bath. It is about mother love. I try to sing it now but it sounds cracked and awful so I hum in in my mind and whimper like a kicked dog. I close my eyes for a good while and I am on him, on the earth. After a time, I open my eyes and I wonder where I was when my eyes were closed, because I was not awake or asleep. Then I don't care where I was because I was with him.

Eventually I move into some sort of sleep. I dream of the hole filled with sea water, of clay mixed with rich dark soil, all of it roiled together in the sea-grave pit— a claycold face simmers out of the earth. All the ugliness comes together in the mottled

light outside my laundry door, a fluorescent pantomime – spotlight on poor people's manky choices.

In my hand I have a handful of Teddy's pillowcase – blistery hands caked in clayblood and weeping ooze. Clutching his pillowcase, I sleep, clenching cloth and clay, dreaming restlessly. I wake suddenly, gasping desperately, because I have lost the smell of him.

My daughter stands beside my bed holding her lamby, sucking her thumb. She takes her thumb out momentarily *MUM?* She says, like it's a question.

Hello my precious angel, I say, whimpering. I inhale sharply. Whimper again. *Come*, I say. I pull back the doona and she crawls into Teddy's bed, huddling in the curve of my belly where it is warm, sucking her thumb. I hum the bath song. It's all I've got. It's jagged but the tune is recognisable, nevertheless.

Research statement

Research background

Nikolić's concept of ideasthesia arises from the 'Ancient Greek words *idea* (for concept) and *aesthesia* (for sensation). Hence ... the term ideasthesia [or] *sensing concepts*' (2016: 2). When we create narrative we generate ideas in sensory terms – as *other*. Ideasthesia takes an interest in the dynamics of the conversion process, from idea to story: what modes of poesis are involved?

Research contribution

'Clay lips and love' is a story about an impoverished mother who buries her son in the back garden. His coffin is a defunct fridge. The author's experience of ideasthesia provides a means for understanding writing process: a way of deconstructing how writers sense concepts (ideas) in metaphorical, associative and sensory ways. On a meta-level, ideasthesia takes an interest in the neurological processes involved in the generation of these images. The work asks, why are 'certain abilities ... deliberately inhibited from conscious awareness' (Snyder 2009: 1)? Why do certain psychological conditions involve 'privileged access to lower level, less processed information' (Snyder 2009: 1)?

Research significance

'Clay lips and love' represents work towards a collection of short fiction. Stories in this collection have been longlisted, shortlisted and published in *Lightship Anthology 2* (UK), *Glimmer Train* (USA), *Séan Ó Faoláin Competition* (IE), *Review of Australian Fiction*, *Australian Book Review's* Elizabeth Jolley Prize, Josephine Ulrick Prize and *TEXT* journal (all Australia). This work was peer reviewed before publication.

Works cited

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