

## Queensland University of Technology (QUT)

### Philip Neilsen

#### The Botanist at his Mother's Grave

Biographical note:

Philip Neilsen has published 15 books, the most recent being *Without an Alibi* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2008) and *The Cambridge Companion to Creative Writing* (2012) co-edited with Professor David Morley from the University of Warwick. He is professor of creative writing at QUT. Email: p.neilsen@qut.edu.au

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## The Botanist at his Mother's Grave

*Wordsworth said ... that a scientist was someone who would botanise  
on his mother's grave. Ian McEwan*

I visit every month to argue with you  
mother, able at last to get my words out  
(you had a sharp eye and tongue –  
once called me your 'failed experiment').

But I understood your churning mood  
generated by genes and injustice,  
the glossy black gates of Tavistock Square,  
conference organisers condescending  
to an Australian woman of science.

No need to bring you shop blooms in cellophane.  
*Viola banksii*, native violet,  
ripples and knots across this rectangle  
and on the headstone behind  
blush of lichen.

Who would have thought you could leave  
such a flood mark on the world;  
educated, bigoted, whimsical, loyal to a fault,  
too expansive to be a species or genus  
pinned between stones in Dutton Park cemetery.

There is a fig tree here you could observe  
if propped up on your elbows,  
and behind that the musky river.  
That tree was raised and disciplined by language  
but messily born of the senses.  
I think you always knew the difference.

The ground cover and its sly fragrance  
wrestles with pigweed and thistle.  
Don't get lost in the detail, you would have said  
with your lopsided mouth.  
So many figs to choose from,  
so much warfare in that brown water.  
You see what a general I can be?  
The universities court me now, give me titles.

I crush some petals between thumb and finger  
and there again your dressing table with its potions,  
or the day you watched me roll down a hill  
through all the bees and clover.  
*They won't sting if you sing to them*

I trusted and they didn't sting.

I say your name aloud now  
surprised at the gentleness.

But I preferred it when we lived  
and bickered in the breakfast room,  
too close to be careful.

Your last face was rough with gardening and pain.

I forgot to tell you,  
last week I read your Didion book –  
the one you underlined with shaky pencil.  
I know the grief traps too, mother,  
but don't know exactly what this is.

It doesn't matter. We can sit and watch the river,  
fingers entwined, listening under birds,  
until I think of a witty answer  
to your last sarcasm, and keep you here still.

## Research statement

### *Research background*

In this poem about processing human grief, I consciously drew on eco-critical theory – (Wilson 1992, Bate 2000) – and Darwinian literary theory (Carroll 2004) to explore the tension between ideas of the ‘natural’ apprehended through the senses, and poststructuralist ideas of the construction of reality through language.

### *Research contribution*

Through the botanist’s monologue, the poem proposes a synthesis of the ‘natural’ as something constructed by language, with more immediate experience via the senses – a concept validated by Darwinian literary theory (eg., our adaptation to the natural world long predates adaptation to the built environment). Although trained to be an observer and classifier of the ‘natural’, the botanist experiences a more intimate connection with both his mother and nature, similar to Heidegger’s ‘Being-in-the-world’. Nature is no longer ‘specimen’, ‘damaged’ or absent ‘other’, but something he and his mother share, putting aside old resentments. In the final draft, I added an allusion to Didion’s grief memoir, to further suggest the botanist has drawn closer to his mother through sharing language.

### *Research significance*

This poem makes some strands of theoretical thinking concrete as lived experience by demonstrating not stating, in creative practice. It builds on a series of poems influenced by eco-criticism that were collected in my book *Without an Alibi*.

## Works cited

Bate, Jonathan 2000 *The Song of the Earth* London: Picador

Carroll, Joseph 2004 *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature and Literature* New York: Routledge

Neilsen, Philip 2008 *Without an Alibi* Cambridge: Salt Publishing.

Wilson, E. O. 1992 *The Diversity of Life* Harvard: Harvard UP