

Swinburne University

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'Much of a muchness'

Biographical note:

Julia Prendergast's novel, *The earth does not get fat*, was published in 2018 (UWA Publishing). Recent short stories feature in *Australian short stories 66* (Pascoe Publishing, 2018). Other stories have been recognised and published: *Lightship anthology 2* (UK), *Glimmer train* (US), *TEXT* (AU) Séan Ó Faoláin Competition (IE), *Review of Australian fiction*, *Australian book review* Elizabeth Jolley Prize, Josephine Ulrick Prize (AU). Julia's research has appeared in various publications including: *New writing*, *TEXT*, *Testimony witness authority: the politics and poetics of experience*. Julia is a Lecturer in Writing and Literature at Swinburne University, Melbourne, and Deputy Chair of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP), the peak academic body representing the discipline of Creative Writing in Australasia.

Keywords:

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James is a weirdo – a dirty little weasel. He's Gene's grandson, he's blood, but she stakes no claim. Without warning, he throws the cat in the spit roast. It's a horrible mess. The cat's torso thwacks against the drum of the spit and her underbelly is singed bare. Her front paws land in the coals.

Pauline says: *You're sixteen years old. It's Christmas ...* Pauline is his Mum, Gene's daughter-in-law. She takes firm hold of the tabby cat. It's making a God-awful noise, screeching, arching and flipping around – it's hard to tell head from tail. Pauline takes the cat over to the table and John pins it out flat, holding the cat down on the table between half eaten plates of lamb and salad. Pauline douses the mashed-up paws with water from the esky. Her hands are trembling. Sweat dribbles down her chest. Her big, bronze breasts are heaving and wobbling with the effort. Her fringe brushes the overhead umbrella, teeming with gold tinsel. She swats the decorations with slimy hands. The sun shines madly – the tinsel looks ablaze.

The cat is hissing, cat eyes bulging. As the embers die, the eyes sink back. They look dead, no shine. The body is limp and then writhing, limp again. On it goes, like a labour. The cat keeps up with this long squealing mew, sounding more human than cat. It doesn't stop to take a breath in, only the pitch changes for a second, as it inhales. Pauline tries to wrap the paws in a wet tea towel but the cat will have none of it.

As the cat is loaded into the car, mewling without reprieve as if the coals were still smouldering her paws, James is beside himself – sobbing, tugging his hair back behind his ears as if he is going to pull it out, upsetting his Christmas-cracker hat, flimsy green paper. It's as if the evil worm didn't know that he would cause the animal pain. Nowadays, some people would say that he's not evil if he didn't understand, that he's something else, like a mental or a slowbo or a depressive or something, but that's not good enough. Gene saw it all. There was intent.

As she leaves for the vet, Pauline turns to her daughter: *Alice, can you start the clean up? Ally ...*

You help too, she adds, levelling her gaze at James.

Why is Pauline even talking to him? Christmas sadist ... He stares vacantly, cloudy-eyed. His Christmas-crown is lopsided and torn – he looks Special Needs 101. Gene sits straight-backed at the festive table. She can barely look at him and she can't look away. Alice starts gathering glasses, giving James a wide berth. Next, she clears the plates. Alice is happy to clean up because her friends always come on Christmas night. John does his bit too – he takes the weirdo to the beach-house. Gene holds on to her plate, loading it with more potato salad and lamb. There are a couple of stray tabby hairs on the table but Gene ignores them – she's still hungry goddammit.

Want a brandy, Mum? says John, pouring her a big whack of it, and another scotch for himself. They sit down at the table, picking at the food. John notices the mottled hairs too, brushing them away as he takes some lamb.

Merry Christmas, says John, slurring, holding the glass out to Gene. He places his other hand on her shoulder, momentarily.

You're a good boy, Johnnie, says Gene, speaking in her storytelling voice, as if he were

still a child.

As John raises his scotch glass to his mouth the liquid catches the glint from the tinsel – his brown eyes sparkle madly, amber gold.

Like Christmas lights ... slurs Gene, taking a gulp of brandy.

You need a lie down, Mum? says John. Been a big day ...

Pauline returns from animal emergency with an armful of dead cat. It is wrapped in an old beach towel, yellow and blue stripes, swaddled tight like a newborn baby, only its tabby head poking out. Pauline rests the carcass on a deck chair and promptly serves the vanilla-slice-cake. She explains that the cat's paws were mashed like jelly, like compote – the embers got stuck in the soft pads underfoot. The vet put her down because of the likelihood of infection.

The vanilla cake is a Christmas highlight – it's from the Swiss patisserie on High Street. When Gene was a girl, her mother would take her to the milk bar every Saturday to buy a vanilla slice. After her brother was born, when her mother wasn't feeling well, Gene walked to the milk bar on her own. The shop owner asked Gene to come around to his side of the bench, so she could show him exactly the one that she wanted. But he didn't say exactly, he said *exacle*, so it sounded like sparkle. The milk-bar-man moved in beside her while she was choosing, bending over the glass cabinet, tongs in hand. He reached around her back with his spare hand, holding her breast, breathing his ashtray breath all over the vanilla slices.

He didn't charge Gene that day and she didn't know what to do with the money. If she gave it back to her mother she would have to explain, and if she kept it and spent it, then she was accepting the transaction. She was putting a price on her left breast – one vanilla slice, a big one, fresh custard, generous on the icing.

John starts speaking faster and faster, blathering about his work: forecasting and technical trends, knowing when to steamroll. No one responds. James twitches occasionally, putting out a noise – a combined grunt and groan, followed by a deep inhale, a quivery giggle. Gene thinks the noises sound strangely sexual, like warped foreplay. He's ruining the taste of the vanilla slice.

Gene turns to James abruptly. *Did you say something?... Cat got your tongue?*

Cut it out, says Pauline. She inspects her hands, speaking more softly. *Please ... Leave well enough alone.*

Alice takes a fleck of Chantilly cream on her pinky finger and puts it on her tongue. She pushes the dessert towards Gene and rests her chin in her palm, glances at the swaddled cat. Gene nods, touching Alice's forearm.

John clears his throat before breaking the news that he won't be going to the beach tonight, after all. *It's been a big day*, he sighs. *I've knocked back a few scotches.*

Alice stands abruptly, upending her chair, squeezing the sheer layers of her black organza skirt between her fingers, squeezing rhythmically as if she is wanking someone. Gene knows all about wanking. She saw the 'how to' tips on the telly. Dear Ned, he'd be having the time of his life if he were still alive.

You promised you'd take him, cries Alice, hysterically.

John lands his scotch glass against the marble table, hard and fast like a cricket ball against a window. The glass splinters but it doesn't break. His hands tremble. Gene stops chewing, momentarily. James moans.

He's a freak, says Alice. *He felt Anna up at my sixteenth. He didn't even talk to her or anything. He came up behind her, making that weird, moaning noise ... and shoved his hand up her skirt.*

That's quite enough, thank you, blurts Pauline. *He is your brother*, she adds.

I understand, Alice ... says Gene, hoping she'll continue, thinking it's about time somebody spoke the truth around here.

SERIOUSLY, yells Alice, glaring at Pauline. *Once a year I have friends over ...*

Pauline speaks in a deep voice, slow and straight-shooting. *He is only trying to feel what other people ... understand.*

Look at my face, says Alice. *I-don't-fucking-care.*

Calm down, says John.

You promised, Alice sobs. *You better watch him ... He might throw someone in the fire.*

ENOUGH! yells John, reaching for the bottle. *Rein it in, NOW*, he adds.

Everyone is quiet. Gene considers changing tack, saying something complimentary about the roast lamb – although that may hit too close to the bone, because the cat was burned by the same fire that roasted the lamb ... Everything is congealed, now.

Gene says nothing. She focuses on Alice, wanking her dress, scrunching the embroidered flowers in her hand like potpourri – orange and plum, curling together like dried rose petals.

For the first hour or so after dark, Gene doesn't hear much at all. The constant thrum of the music is there but not enough to drown *Prisoner* out. Gene watches the re-run, hanging on every word like a groupie, a *Prisoner* junkie.

Ned would have found *Prisoner* trashy. He was very conservative really, so maybe the sexual revolution that Gene fantasises about was always out of the question. But we change in ways that we cannot imagine, and Gene doesn't think Ned would have been able to refuse a quick hand-job on the couch, especially now that she really knows her stuff.

As she watches the women in the prison laundry room, she thinks how nice it would be to live with a big group of women. Not that she wants to go to prison, of course, because they wouldn't have vanilla slice there, or if they did it would probably be out of a packet

– only she'd like to live like that, in a community of women. The men could pop in of course, so that they could have sex with them, but then they could go again, because women make the world go round.

That probably sounds sexist but it's true of Gene's life, of the man she knew and the men she didn't. She was accustomed to having Ned around and she misses him, but now she'd only have a man for the sex.

Gene gets another *Prisoner* episode ready, pouring a glass of port and making a fresh pot of tea in the half-dark. She thinks she'll watch one of the early episodes – the stabbing in the tearoom – her favourite. Gene wasn't a big fan of port in the old days but she figures that we have to keep re-inventing ourselves, and part of re-inventing is remembering. When she has a port it's like Ned has popped in from the passing on. She can taste him and smell him in the old show port. Gene loves her little granny-flat at the side of Johnnie's house. It's semi-detached but feels like her own home.

Gene hears voices, close, as if they're inside, in her ensuite. She pauses the telly and heads to the bathroom. She puts her ear against the flyscreen of the ensuite window. She can't hear anything and she thinks they've probably gone, only then she hears loud whispering from below the window, and slurred giggling. She can hear kissing, wet-lip smacking, and moaning. *Not here*, says the female voice.

Where then? Around the front? Gene freezes then because he's right there, steadying himself against the outside wall. The pittosporums shake. She sees his big square head and she holds as still as a dead cat.

Let's go around the front, he says.

Gene creeps hurriedly, back to her bedroom. She turns the telly off at the switch so there's no light from the screen. She plants herself on the broad seat under the bay window and waits. The heavy curtains are open but the sheer curtains are always drawn. Gene can see out but people can't see in. She takes hold of the handle through the slippery veil of the curtain. As the breeze brushes her wrist, she realises the windows are already open. She can hear them coming.

It's only a moment before Gene sees the boy with the big square head. The girl joins him and they link hands, walking across the lawn, pausing at the bottlebrush tree. They are directly outside her bedroom window, only a few feet away. The bottlebrush is quite a decent size now so the conditions must be just right—afternoon sun, well-drained soil. When it came into its own, John planted some red roses and red geraniums along the front, as a surprise.

The young couple kiss awhile and they whisper but she can't catch anything they say. It gets caught in the wind and the curtains. The girl takes off her coat and spreads it over the grass – she whispers in his ear. He lowers himself down, spreading himself out on the coat like a picnic. She unzips him and Gene is surprised, thinking he was the one, but the girl pulls his jeans down and takes his penis in her mouth. They are concealed from the street by the bottlebrush, so it seems private to them, but they're right in front of her, like a stage play. If she were to leap out of the window she would land on their taut, sweat-slicked flesh. Gene takes a breath, remembering chiselled flesh and perspiring loins.

Johnnie had the Internet put on for her and cable television too, to give her more viewing options. The upshot is that Gene knows more about sex, now, than she ever knew when she was in the thick of it. She wouldn't have it any other way though. She loves the memory of her and Ned, fumbling, finding their way. It wasn't all about the orgasm; it was more about the yearning and the fantasy. Gene used to be nervous about fantasies. That's how it was. Everything was a sin. Alice tells Gene that sin is mind-numbing bullshit. She says sin is for uptight fucksticks who can't think original thoughts.

These days, Gene is aware of the pleasure principle and all that. She wishes Neddy was around, to test a few things out on, or someone else, just for fun, because there's a lot of uncharted water there. It sounds sleazy because she's an old lady, but that's just the outside layer, all the yearning is still there and she hopes to God that goes when you die – imagine if you were stuck with all that yearning when your hands were too dead to pick up a vibrator.

The girl runs her hands under his shirt and rubs her weight against his thighs. Every now and again she stops and makes him beg her. It is a joy to watch. When she stops for a third time, she slides off her flat shoes and her underwear. She lifts her short skirt up and out of the way.

Gene can barely believe what she's seeing and, if she can't have a go at these things herself, this is the next best thing, more real than virtual. The girl is calling the shots and Gene is so very proud of her. She thinks it must be nearly over. She doesn't know how they can hold on for another second. The girl pulls her chest upright, unbuttoning her bra – it opens at the front, ingenious. She takes his hands, one at a time, and places them on her breasts. The boy can't stand it; he tries to pull her back down but she won't be rushed.

When the girl has had her fill, she pushes his hands away, gently. He lifts his head to kiss her but she covers his mouth and makes him wait. Gene feels like clapping. Her hands are held together, under her chin, ready to clap. She notices that her hands are there because a tear runs down her finger, across her wrist. For a moment, Gene thinks it's blood because she bleeds easily these days, any little bump will set her off, and she's not usually one for crying. Gene wants to applaud the girl because she knows what she wants and she demands it. She won't settle for anything short of the icing on the vanilla slice.

As the couple walk back towards the driveway, the girl whispers something in his ear. He kisses her on the head and then vanishes. The girl hoists herself onto the red brick letterbox, the Queen of the Castle. She crosses her legs and runs her hands through her straight, shoulder length hair, getting a bit of air in it, giving it a bit of body.

Alice appears then, walking towards her with a smile on her face and a little bottle of champagne in her hand. The Queen puts one of her hands up in the air, like a stop sign or a salute. Alice runs the last few steps and they smack their palms together. They laugh and then hug like the women who live in the land of Gene's dreams. They sip champagne from the small bottle, one straw each.

Out of the corner of her eye, Gene catches a shadow. It's as if she's sitting in her room in the afternoon, as if a cloud rolls in suddenly, shifting the light, except that it's night and there's no sun, only the smouldering light from the streetlamp. It's James. He creeps out from a bush, from the blind side of the house. He, too, has been watching and it's an underhanded watching. Gene wants to believe her motives are better than his ... she would never hurt an animal.

Rushing clumsily towards the ensuite door, Gene bangs her knuckles against the architrave. She flicks the switch for the garden light, flashing the beam on and then off, like a sensor – once, twice – so that Alice and the Queen can see James, moving between the house and the bottlebrush. Gene's knuckles bleed profusely – blood and tears awash, like much of a muchness.

Research statement

Research background

Danko Nikolić's neuroscientific concept of ideasthesia arises from the 'Ancient Greek words idea (for concept) and aesthesis (for sensation). Hence [...] the term ideasthesia [or] sensing concepts' (2016: np). This is useful for understanding how writers 'sense' ideas in metaphorical ways. Christopher Bollas' concept of the unthought known 'integrates aspects of Freud's theory of unconscious thinking with elements from the British Object Relations School' (2017: preface). Bollas argues that 'within the analytic relationship it becomes possible, at least in part, to think the unthought' (2017: preface). The original concept of ideasthetic imagining brings these concepts together, revealing that narrative detail is capable of radical transformation – as the writer thinks the unthought, the 'unthought known' becomes incrementally recognisable.

Research contribution

'Much of a muchness' is a short story that enacts the concepts of ideasthesia and the unthought known at the level of form and content, interrogating the connection between embodied experience and understanding: Gene assesses her past in fragments through the present, her grandson's aberrant behaviour, which falls outside of that which is considered socially acceptable. Gene's perspective is unsettled as her voyeuristic motives seem to coalesce with those of her grandson, whom she has effectively *othered*. This is consonant with Freud's thesis in 'The Uncanny' – the mystifying process Freud outlines where 'the word *heimlich* [...] develops in the direction of ambivalence until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*' (1919: 421). This invites discussion: how do ideasthetic practices in narrative represent creative problem-solving?

Research significance

This story was a finalist in the *Glimmer train* International Family Matters Short Story Award 2018, US (top 2 – 3 % of submissions, internationally), and a finalist in the *Glimmer train* International Fiction Open Short Story Award 2018, US (top 10 % of submissions, internationally).

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