

UNIVERSITY OF CHICHESTER

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Department of English & Creative Writing

**The Inland Sea: Liminality, Metamorphic Experience and the Short Story
Form**

Volume II/ II

by

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Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

This thesis has been completed as a requirement for a higher degree of the University
of Southampton

January 2015

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ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Philosophy

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SHORT STORY FORM

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This thesis is comprised of two parts. The primary component is a work of original fiction: the short story collection, *The Inland Sea*. The stories are accompanied by the critical essay, 'Liminality, Metamorphic Experience and the Short Story Form'. Both components explore the form that rites of passage and liminality take in the contemporary world. The critical essay projects a related 'threshold poetics' of the short story.

The Inland Sea explores lives in transitional states, from Argentina to Siberia, from Papua New Guinea to London and New York. The characters populating these stories are adrift in a contemporary world that is fluid and uncertain, where both boundaries and human relationships are shifting. An astronaut struggles to adapt to life back on earth. A young man discovers he is going blind in a foreign city. An aging lothario clings to new routine in a Tokyo hotel. All share in the struggle to maintain a sense of connection and order in the face of disorientating change.

The origins of the word metaphor lie in the Greek, '*metapherein*', to 'transfer' (SOED), and embrace doubleness, change and flux. Drawing on Victor Turner's description of metaphor as 'liminal monster', alongside Paul Ricoeur's study of metaphorical process, 'Liminality, Metamorphic Experience and the Short Story Form' proposes that the short story is innately metaphorical, fashioning contradictions characteristic of the liminal or threshold state and deriving power from an accommodation of the ambiguous. The formal charge of the short story, while distinct from poetry and the novel, draws on the narrative and poetic capacities of both: it is an agile, hybrid form combining metaphorical charge with textual strategies such as ellipsis, omission, negation, repetition, and 'phasing', as coined by Manuel Aguirre. The short story's compression, combined with such strategies, makes it adept at challenging the structured or paradigmatic progression of traditional tripartite narrative. As a form it has an ability to promote ongoing metamorphoses, or metamorphic flux. These dynamics of the short form are examined through study of threshold states in the contemporary short story with close textual reference to the less studied, later work of Alice Munro and to the work of Nam Le and David Means which, though widely praised, has had little critical attention. Drawing in particular on the body as a context for liminal states and as a conduit to the psychological and emotional realms, the essay explores the ways threshold tensions shape viscerally charged metamorphic experience as much for the reader as for the protagonists involved. This study aims to offer a counterpoint to unity theories of the short form, and to establish the rich potential for further research into a 'threshold poetics' of the short story.

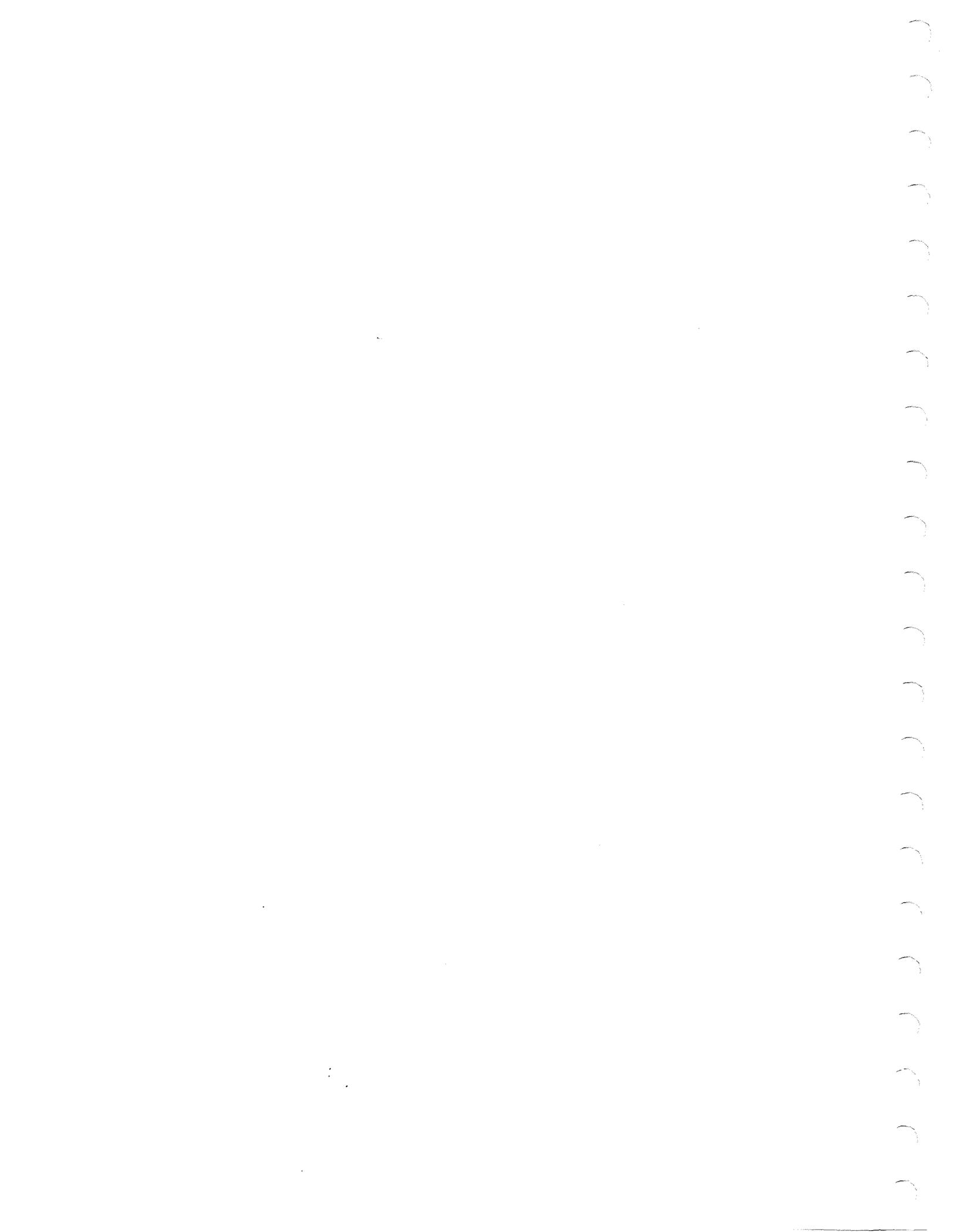


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ATTRIBUTIONS

Among prior studies of the concept of liminality in relation to literature, one of the most significant and sustained projects began in 1998 as an informal research group at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, later leading to the publication of the interdisciplinary series of papers, *Studies in Liminality and Literature (SLL)*, by The Gateway Press. The project took the work of the ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep and the anthropologist Victor Turner as a starting point, and sought to study resonances of the marginal, the liminal and the threshold in literature, music and film. 'The LIMEN Group' held international seminars biennially, between 1999 and 2007, inviting participation by scholars from a considerable range of disciplines.

In March 2013, the University of Wuerzburg, Germany, held an international conference on *Liminality and the Short Story*. I am grateful to all of those who participated in the conference for broadening my understanding of the wide range of approaches to research that are ongoing in this fascinating subject area. I am further indebted to Dr Jochen Achilles and Dr Ina Bergmann both for hosting the conference and for their support as I prepared a chapter based on my conference presentation for publication.

While appearing here in substantially revised and reworded form, my discussion of Nam Le in Part II of the critical thesis was developed in part through my presentation, 'The Voice of the Body: Liminality and Narrative Closure in Alice Munro and Nam Le', which was delivered at the conference *The Singer not the Song: Narration in the Short Story* at Sheffield Hallam University, June 2011, and in part through my author essay on Nam Le (see Appendix A) which appears in *Critical Survey of Short Fiction (4th Edition)*, 2012.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

(For full details see the bibliography)

AFE	Means, David. <i>Assorted Fire Events</i> .
'A Proposed Definition'	Rohrberger, Mary. 'The Short Story: A Proposed Definition.'
'Burning'	Russo, Maria. 'Burning Down the House.' Rev. of <i>Assorted Fire Events</i> , by David Means.
'Challenging Character'	Le, Nam. 'I am my most challenging character.' Interview by Megan Walsh.
'Closure'	Winther, Per. 'Closure and Preclosure as Narrative Grid in Short Story Analysis.'
'Debunking'	Leitch, Thomas. 'The Debunking Rhythm of the American Short Story.'
<i>Dramas</i>	Turner, Victor. <i>Dramas, Fields & Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society</i> .
<i>Drums</i>	Turner, Victor. <i>The Drums of Affliction: A Study of Religious Processes among the Ndembu of Zambia</i> .
'Irresponsible'	Haneke, Michael. 'Why "Schindler's List" is Irresponsible.'
'Masterclass'	Constantine, David. 'Short Story Masterclass with David Constantine.' Interview by Katherine Orr.
'Metaphoric'	May, Charles E. 'Metaphoric Motivation in the Short Fiction: "In the Beginning was the Story".'
'Metaphorical Process'	Ricoeur, Paul. 'The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling.'
'Nature and Aim'	O'Connor, Flannery. 'The Nature and Aim of Fiction.'
'Nature of Knowledge'	May, Charles E. 'The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction.'
'Not Knowing'	Constantine, David. 'Short Stories and the Power of "Not Knowing".'
'Origins'	Rohrberger, Mary. 'Origins, Development, Substance, and Design of the Short Story.'

‘Overloaded’	Wood, James. ‘Overloaded with Wasps.’ Rev. of <i>The Secret Goldfish</i> , by David Means.
‘Phasing’	Aguirre, Manuel. ‘The Phasing of Form: A Liminalist Strategy in Fairytales.’
‘Phenomenology’	Trussler, Michael. ‘Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, and the Short Story as Threshold.’
‘Prairie Lights’	Tower, Wells. ‘Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned.’ Interview by Sarah Fay. <i>Live from Prairie Lights</i> .
<i>Reading</i>	Brooks, Peter. <i>Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative</i> .
‘Recalcitrance’	Wright, Austin. M. ‘Recalcitrance in the Short Story.’
‘Secular’	Moore, Sally F. and Barbara G. Myerhoff. ‘Secular Ritual: Forms and Meaning.’ Introduction. <i>Secular Ritual</i> .
‘Small’	Kennedy, A. L. ‘Small in a Way that a Bullet is Small.’
‘Social Dramas’	Turner, Victor. ‘Social Dramas and Stories about Them.’
‘Special-case’	May, Charles E. “‘Special-case Status’ of the Short Story as Prose Narrative.’
‘Suspended’	Trussler, Michael. ‘Suspended Narratives: the Short Story and Temporality.’
TB	Le, Nam. <i>The Boat</i> .
‘The Rumpus’	Means, David. ‘The Rumpus Interview with David Means.’ Interview by Tom Barbash.
<i>Time and Subjectivity</i>	Cox, Ailsa. <i>Time and Subjectivity in Contemporary Short Fiction</i> .
TMH	Munro, Alice. <i>Too Much Happiness</i> .
‘Variations’	Turner, Victor. ‘Variations on a Theme of Liminality.’

**LIMINALITY, METAMORPHIC EXPERIENCE AND
THE SHORT STORY FORM**

INTRODUCTION

liminal (from Latin *limin-* LIMEN + -AL)

1 Of, pertaining to, or constituting a transitional or initial stage of a process.
Also, marginal, incidental, insignificant.

2 Of, pertaining to, or situated at a limen; occupying a position on, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold.

metamorphosis (Latin from Greek *metamorphōsis*, from *metamorphoun* transform)

1 The action or process of changing in form, shape, or substance

2 A complete change in appearance, circumstances, condition, or character

(Shorter Oxford English Dictionary)

1. Liminality and the Short Story Form

At the core of the short story lies flux: a quality as important to the form as it is to the subjects explored by its writers. In contrast to the larger landscape of the novel the short story situates both characters and readers 'on the brink', promoting the often uncomfortable intensity of threshold experience. I will examine the dynamics of the short story form by drawing on the concept of liminality, investigating the ways in which complex threshold states are brought to life.¹ Through original liminalist analysis of contemporary stories by Alice Munro, Nam Le and David Means, I will seek to promote greater understanding of the plural capacities of the short story, projecting a 'threshold poetics' of the form informed by its metamorphic and sensate nature.² Charles E. May has noted contemporary critical 'distrust [of] short fiction as too formal and thus too distant from the flesh and blood of ordinary reality' ('Special-case' 154). Central to my study is the belief that the short story derives considerable power from its connectedness to the physical life.

In *The Ritual Process* the anthropologist Victor Turner describes the 'attributes of liminality' as 'necessarily ambiguous', the condition referring to existence 'neither here nor there' but 'betwixt and between' (95). In 'Variations on a Theme of Liminality' he states: 'the most characteristic midliminal symbolism is that of paradox, or being *both* this *and* that' (37). In *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, he posits a connection between liminality and 'multivocal symbols and metaphors' (28), expressive of 'a world in becoming', of 'flux and changefulness' (24). The 'metamorphic' (25) quality of metaphor is key to my discussion of the dynamics of the short story form.

The origins of the word 'metaphor' lie in the Greek, '*metapherein*', to 'transfer' (SOED). I propose that the short story form is innately metaphorical, fashioning contradictions characteristic of the liminal or threshold state, drawing distinct power from its accommodation of the ambiguous.³ It is a power extending beyond subject matter to textual echoes and amplifications contributing to the heightened resonances, and intense, productive dissonances, of the form. Repetition, 'phasing' and ellipsis, for instance, as well as metaphor, can be seen to serve as elements of a 'threshold poetics'.⁴ Manuel Aguirre describes 'phasing' as an act of

attention which ‘suspends’ action, ‘holding it in a betwixt-and-between state’ and ‘restoring to it its original value and intensity’ (‘Phasing’ 20).

2. Liminality as Metamorphic Experience in the Short Story

In his delineation of social rites of passage, the ethnographer and folklorist Arnold Van Gennep outlines a tripartite ritual progression, with rites of ‘separation’, ‘transition’ (the liminal phase), and ‘incorporation’ (11).⁵ Victor Turner extends this enquiry, exploring society’s ‘processual’ forms (*Ritual Process* 13). The word ‘process’ features in definitions of both ‘liminal’ and ‘metamorphosis’ (SOED). It is a bridge between the terms, and one that connects Turner’s view of society as ‘dialectical’, as ‘a process rather than a thing’, to my own belief that the short story is an infinitely complex ‘live’ form (*Ritual Process* 203).⁶

I will be guided by the concept of metamorphic experience as I explore ‘process’ in the contemporary short story. I am keen to draw attention to ways that the complexity of our lives may be communicated by elements and strategies of short fiction which can reiterate psychological and emotional, as well as physical, flux.

My exploration of the dynamics of the form will draw in particular on the body as a medium for liminal states and a conduit to the psychological and emotional realms. Ovid’s metaphors of physical transfiguration serve as a useful touchstone here. His ‘purpose’, in his narrative poem *The Metamorphoses*, is ‘to tell of bodies which have been transformed into shapes of a different kind’ (Innes 29). Those bodies, those transformations, can be treated as extensions of the psychological and emotional, or as ‘a complex of narrativised metaphors for the human condition’ (Hardie 229).

Completion, however, very often has little part in the contemporary short story, and as a study of metamorphic experience this study is no more concerned with tracing complete physical transformations than it is with charting completed ritual. I am interested in the short story’s capacity to communicate the unfinished: for instance, unsanctioned and incomplete rites – troubled unofficial versions of rites that come off as warped echoes of their socially sanctioned counterparts.⁷ In Part I, I will

be using the notion of unsanctioned initiation as a starting point for my discussion of Munro.

I will extend my analysis of liminality as metamorphic experience by drawing on writers' accounts of the visceral charge that animates their own craft, positing connections between the 'live' quality of the short story and the form's threshold strategies. I will argue that a 'threshold poetics' of the short story should incorporate the dialogue between writer and reader: a dual act of creation that draws on the commonality of the body, the senses and the physical life.⁸

3. The Creative Writing Ph.D.

My own interest in both rites of passage and liminality is longstanding, and as a writer I continue to find this conceptual territory resonant. The tension between coherent world views and the threat of incoherence, or chaos, is always a source of fascination to me – along with the myriad ways in which we attempt to impose order on a defiant, shape-shifting world. While rites of passage engage with an idea of ordered life processes, they have at their heart the liminal phase, which represent a challenge to that order.

As a reader and as a writer I am drawn to the idea of the incomplete metamorphosis, a close cousin of the curtailed or unfinished rite of passage – a process which has been cut off too soon, denied closure, completion, and is perhaps related particularly to contemporary life. I am also drawn to the notion of unsanctioned rites of passage – subversive or troubling tales of initiation taking place in a contemporary world that can seem increasingly dislocated, fragmented, and awash with uncertainty and incoherence.

Evocations of the amorphous and the paradoxical establish a compelling tension in texts that seem to thrive on their challenge to coherence, a challenge that seems to me, almost inevitably, to play off a core narrative awareness of the tripartite structure – the tug of the ordered sequence of beginning, middle and end, which can seem ever-present, even in absence.

Challenging order is one of the things the short story does best; the compression of a form charged by threshold strategies can, at best, be exhilarating, often thwarting expectation. The related process, as a writer, of seeking a greater understanding of the dynamics of the form, is undoubtedly one of the pleasures of engaging in a dual creative-critical thesis.

4. Towards a Methodology

In 'Toward a Literary Anthropology' Wolfgang Iser projected the great potential of inter-disciplinary dialogue, while acknowledging the danger, always, of any theory – including anthropology – 'subjugating' literature in acts of model-making (*Prospecting* 264).

My own approach is informed by my interest as both writer and student. In this critical essay, by drawing on three main frames of reference – anthropology, short story theory and narratology – I am aiming less for a theory of the short story, with the implied dangers of model-making, and more for a method of approach that might open up new dialogue about the unique capacities of the form. Implicit in my approach is the wish for commerce between the spheres of knowledge I draw upon, as much as between those texts chosen for in-depth analysis.

My own interest in anthropology was first triggered by Clifford Geertz, who describes man as 'an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun' (5). As time has passed, I have found myself mentally paraphrasing and thereby amending the original, so that we live, instead, in worlds of meaning of our own creation. What is interesting about my rewrite is its aversion to a perceived sense of entrapment in the original: Geertz's phrasing, for me, pushes the metaphor of the spider by means of the word 'suspended', so that the whole phrase is laced with the inference of stasis – paralysis even. What drew me to the phrase originally was the implication of agency in Geertz's acknowledgement of a world of meaning as self-spun, with an attendant sense of the adaptable in relation to the nature of that world. What I found troubling about the phrase was the suggestion that one might end up mutely suspended in that world, a victim, but to oneself.

The double nature of my response has remained live for me, in spite of – or indeed because of – my engagement with the original through ongoing attempts at rewrites. The very activity of such reiterative engagement, while confirming the power and agency of the original metaphor, works simultaneously to write it live in the memory: an indelible paradox. I will return to this question of the sense of agency that is associated with metaphor in more detail later.

Iser himself conjures Geertz when he discusses the way engagement with literature in general can lead to a ‘change of perception’, allowing us ‘to see ourselves as that within which we are entangled’ (*Prospecting* 283). Crucial to Iser’s conception of the agency of the fictive is the perspective gained from an implied ‘doubling’ of worlds – in this case ‘the world of the text’ and ‘the world it represents’ (272).⁹ While Iser engages more broadly with fiction as a medium, the ‘boundary-crossings’ (270) he evokes are important here: it is just such ‘dynamic oscillation’ (271) between worlds that informs my own interest in the agency of the short story. If the fictive is ‘a means of overstepping the given’ (268), an interplay between worlds, how then does the short story distinguish itself from literature in general? If, for Iser, the imaginary itself has ‘protean potential’ (279), engaging in a ‘diversified play of transformation’ (278), how does the short story in particular harness this potential? Iser is inspirational on the power and agency of literature, and it is my aim, in this exploration of liminality and metamorphic experience, to foreground and to celebrate the power and agency of the short story, not only for its plural engagement as a form with ‘worlds – or world-views – in contest’ (Aguirre, Quance, and Sutton 10), but for the way the body adds a pulse to the metamorphic flux of perceptual worlds, rendering them viscerally affective.

5. Theories of the Short Story and Problems of Definition

In *The Modernist Short Story*, Dominic Head makes ‘a plea for a more rigorous theorizing of the short story’ (xi), one that avoids the reductionism, or ‘monolithic tendency’ (3) of much short story theory, with its limiting focus on the unity of the form. It is a plea echoed recently by Per Winther, which suggests that the battle is ongoing (‘What IS a Short Story?’ 136).

Short story theory has long wrangled with issues of over-simplification and essentialism – a history dating back to Edgar Allan Poe’s now legendary review of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*. Poe’s ‘single effect’ (298) has been followed by James Joyce’s ‘epiphany’ (216-218) and Frank O’Connor’s ‘submerged population groups’ (18).¹⁰ As Winther points out, the danger in seeking defining characteristics is that of ‘[appropriating] for a special type of story a generic label that confuses rather than clarifies the issue’, with the attendant risk of promoting the belief that ‘all short stories behave in [a particular] manner’ (‘What IS a Short Story?’ 140). While short story theory risks ossification if such beliefs go unchallenged, Charles E. May is right to claim that a ‘good theory’ is worthwhile ‘if it heuristically enables one to see previously neglected features and relations’ (qtd. in Trussler, ‘Phenomenology’ 147).¹¹

If unity theories run the risk of essentialism, more recent theories, seeking to clarify historical developments in the form, have – as Head points out – fallen into binary thinking (16). Short story criticism is in general agreement that the end of the nineteenth century saw a shift towards what would become a more ‘open’ form: a shift that in broad terms began with Chekhov, and led to modernism (Hunter 48; March-Russell 93). If critical responses to this evolution are tidy, running the risk of archiving writers in predetermined categories – the ‘plotted story’ versus the ‘slice-of-life’ story; the ‘simple’ versus the ‘complex’; the ‘conventional’ versus the ‘open-ended’ (Head 16) – they at least afford the form greater scope and complexity overall. What Adrian Hunter describes as the ‘generic conventionalism’ associated with the nineteenth century gave way to ‘modernism’s valorization of *difficulty*’, placing new demands on readers with the ‘free play of interpretative possibility’ (48).

While Head locates his study of short stories within the context of the historical forces shaping modernist literature – foregrounding dissonance and instability over unity or single effect – his wider aim is to avoid what he describes as a ‘puzzle-solving’ approach to the genre as a whole (18), and to restore a greater complexity both to the short story and to short story theory.¹²

How is this call for complexity to be addressed? Wallace Martin, discussing ‘open form’ with regard to the novel as well as the short story, argues that ‘there is little hope of discovering an underlying set of structural principles in texts that so

obviously confute our zeal for regularity' (83). If as a genre the short story is such a shape-shifter, capable of so much, then it is worth heeding advice Winther points to: that 'we can only come up with central tendencies rather than absolutes' (Friedman 16). We should therefore be looking for 'differences in *degree*' rather than essentialist 'differences in *kind*' (Winther 'What IS a short story?' 140). It is a more balanced approach than drafting dogma, and plays its part in my discussion of a 'threshold poetics' of the short story. One of the greatest challenges of working towards a deeper understanding of generic form is giving scope for the complexity and creative instability that Head evokes.

Implicit in the short story's changeability, or instability, is a free commerce with other genres. 'Well, what's a short story?' Wells Tower has said. 'To me, a short story can be anything' ('Lit Show').

Nam Le is interesting on this question of nebulous formal distinction:

Of course poetry can be narrative, and novels poetic, but generally the two forms move language through different elements. Short stories, to my mind, are suited to transition between these elements. A short story can do everything a novel can do – except be long. Conversely, a short story is arguably better suited than a novel to adopt poetic logics such as compression, ellipticism, associativeness, metaphorical charge, etc. In this way, even though short stories are shorter than novels, I like their capaciousness. They can tell a story whilst simultaneously claiming poetry's prerogative to communicate before it means. ('Challenging Character')

While Kasia Boddy has described any proposed allegiance between poetry and the short story as 'commonplace' (7), Le goes further, acknowledging the contradictions inherent in the form: short and compressed, but capacious; working with a clear narrative intent but incorporating too, a less direct, more elusive quality – the work of 'poetic logics' implying communication before meaning. It is not simply that the short story adopts poetic logics, and it is not simply that, like the novel, it is a narrative form. It is a threshold form, a form in 'transition'.

The suggestion that a short story can, like poetry, 'communicate before it means', is tantalising. If the arrival of meaning implies an element of concretisation, it is the preceding communication that is of interest for its ability to remain processual. What form does this communication take, and how does it operate within

a genre that can also claim prerogatives associated less with poetry, and more with narrative fiction, and the novel?

Wells Tower suggests that the short story should be ‘trafficking in moments that would work themselves into the long-term memory’, moments associated with ‘a pricking up of the senses and a quickening of the heart’, and with ‘excess meaning’ – a kind of surplus that ‘[w]e don’t know exactly what to do with’ (‘Lit Show’). If, as I will argue, the short story is particularly adept at getting to the heart of those life experiences that fulfil Wells Tower’s criteria, that quicken the heart with ‘excess meaning’ and stay in the long-term memory, then how is that meaning shaped, and does it in fact ever concretise? To return to the question of degree: by drawing on the body – a live connector between reader and writer – is the short story writer any *more* able than poets or novelists, through distinctive threshold strategies, to deliver complexity and open-endedness? Is it possible that the body, by serving to ‘communicate before it means’, is incorporate in the form’s threshold charge?

6. Short Story Writers on the Short Story

Nadine Gordimer’s description of the short story is well known: the form conveys ‘the quality of human life’ – a quality ‘like the flash of fireflies’, one that the novel, with its distinct ‘coherence of tone’ could not hope to convey (346). The art of the short story, she claims, is the art of ‘the present moment’ (346).

While Gordimer’s choice of words – ‘present’, ‘flash’ – cannot help but carry a suggestion of the ephemeral, I believe it is her intention to emphasise the *living* quality of the short story: the vital energy of a form that keeps complexity alive. As I will argue, there is nothing fleeting about a form that embraces contradiction to the extent the short story does – with endings that are as likely to present puzzles as solutions, closure can prove elusive. The short story may be a fugitive form, but not in the sense that it is fleeting.

For many short story writers, the body and the senses are integral to the process of communicating the live complexity that Gordimer invokes. It is a quality bound up not only in the present moment: the form has the potential to go ‘beyond

itself', as Ali Smith puts it, in 'constant continuance' ('All there is' 66, 82). Impressing itself on the reader with a visceral charge, the short story has the power to deliver its puzzles, contradictions and irresolution with a 'sensory and sensual shock' (77), memorably described by A. L. Kennedy as a 'punch that will hit your reader and blow their fucking head off' ('Small' 3). In the essay 'Small in a Way That a Bullet is Small' Kennedy quotes Mavis Gallant, who opened her own collection of stories with this immortal prescription to her reader: "'Don't read these all at once, you could die! It's not like a box of chocolates and even those would make you sick. Animal! Read them one at a time maybe once a week'" (3). There is a challenge to the reader implicit in her words, as well as the command: a challenge to step up to the mark, to engage with each story using the body and the mind. The short story, she is saying, is not for passive consumption: it is a form that will take time to process, to digest – Smith's 'continuance'.

Flannery O'Connor, conversely, presents a challenge to the *writer* of the short story: 'I think one reason that people find it so difficult to write stories is that they forget how much time and patience is required to convince through the senses' ('Writing Short Stories' 91). She claims that the 'meaning of a story has to be embodied in it' (96), the writer's task 'to create a world with weight and extension' (92).

Raymond Carver forges an allegiance between writer and reader – both, he points out, quoting Chekhov, are "'created of warm blood and nerves'" ('Author's Foreword' xiv).¹³ For Carver, the reading experience should be a physical process, provoking a change of body temperature, affecting both 'our hearts [and] our intellects' (xiv). The quotation that follows locates craft in the process:

This is what I wanted to do with my own stories: line up the right words, the precise images, as well as the exact and correct punctuation so that the reader got pulled in and involved in the story and wouldn't be able to turn away his eyes from the text unless the house caught fire. (xii)

Of course, any writer can draw the body into text; it is not exclusively the domain of the short story. However, taking my cue from Carver, I suggest that the craft available to the writer of the short form, allied with the visceral charge that the writers above evoke, render the form active – or processual – in a unique way.

Writers become particularly revealing in this respect, when they describe not only a physical imperative associated with the short form, but an awareness of threshold activity. In an ICA interview, Alice Munro gives insight into her sense of a connection between the physical and the importance of layering – of gaps and boundaries and thresholds – to her work:

Munro: I always think of writing and I always tend to describe writing in *physical* terms. I want things to be very dense. I want layers, and gaps between the layers, and everything sort of coming in [...].

Interviewer: [...] [Y]ou sounded as though you feel it sort of almost sensuously, as a touch.

Munro: Oh yes, I do. [...] I want a kind of texture that I feel around me all the time. And if I'm not writing I feel this texture of the world as a kind of constant pressure – I have to write about it.' ('Alice Munro discusses her work')

Read alongside what is perhaps the most often-quoted of her remarks on the short story, it offers an intriguing glimpse into an approach combining embodiment with threshold tensions, Munro drawing attention to the fresh perspectives associated with threshold activity: 'It's [. . .] like a house. Everybody knows what a house does, how it encloses space and makes connections between one enclosed space and another and presents what is outside in a new way' ('What Is Real?' 661).

The sense of textured pressure that Munro describes, and the awareness of boundaries or thresholds, relate to Wells Tower's belief that 'fiction tends to be born out of lots of different rival impulses', and that the best approach to writing the short form is 'to constrain it' until 'you let the story kind of herniate' ('Prairie Lights'). It is a vivid figurative evocation both of the powerful compression of the short form, and of the way such compressed power might come into being.

7. Liminality and Metaphor as Process

Aixo era y no era (it was and it was not) (Ricoeur 'Metaphorical Process' 153)

I have suggested that the short form is innately metaphorical, embracing doubleness, change and flux, and outlined Victor Turner's account of metaphor as 'metamorphic'

(*Dramas* 25). It is this notion of metaphor as process that I take forward – its use as a dynamic act within a text, drawing disparate elements together, and forging live connections for the reader. Metaphor is, Turner writes, ‘a species of liminal monster [. . .] whose combination of familiar and unfamiliar features or unfamiliar combination of familiar features provokes us into thought, provides us with new perspectives’ (31).

There is an immense body of work on metaphor: ‘Metaphors are the growing-points of language’ (Honderich 555), ‘the dreamwork of language’ (Davidson 31), and part of ‘the symbolic language of metamorphosis, or resemblance’ (Stevens, *Necessary Angel* 78).¹⁴ The opening quotation – attributed to Marjorcan storytellers, and a pithy account of metaphor’s playful contradictions – comes via Paul Ricoeur, who, by alluding to the figure of speech as the product of a ‘semantic collision’, conveys the creative force of the threshold tensions at work (*Rule of Metaphor* 112). Negotiating the space between contradiction and accord, metaphor is for him both destructive and generative: ‘The dictionary contains no metaphors; they exist only in discourse. For this reason, metaphorical attribution is superior to every other use of language in showing what “living speech” really is’ (112).

I propose a connection between Ricoeur’s tension-laden but generative ‘living speech’ and Gordimer’s art of ‘the present moment’ (346). If for Gordimer the novel’s very coherence cannot adequately convey the nature of human life, by inference a certain *incoherence* of tone is necessary for the short form; the ‘live’ art of the short story is an art redolent of Ricoeur’s Majorcan maxim: ‘it was and it was not’.

Ricoeur further claims that metaphorical meaning not only ‘denies the well-established distinction between sense and representation’ but, by ‘blurring this distinction, [. . .] compels us to explore the borderline between the verbal and the non-verbal’ (‘Metaphorical Process’ 151). This being the case, then it is possible that in the flux between the two, metaphorical meaning does not concretise, but exists as a metamorphic, borderline presence.¹⁵

Ricoeur evokes a processual space that exists not only on the page but also in the imaginative space between writer and reader. The charge of metaphor lies

between elements, or ideas. This space – a shared act of conjuring between reader and writer – is elusive, uncertain, rich with allusion and associativeness, uncanny and even disturbing. Metaphor is an elliptical act, and an act of generosity to the reader, for whom there is space in the text. As Donald Davidson writes:

Metaphor is the dreamwork of language and, like all dreamwork, its interpretation reflects as much on the interpreter as on the originator. The interpretation of dreams requires collaboration between a dreamer and a waker, even if they be the same person; and the act of interpretation is itself a work of the imagination. So too understanding a metaphor is as much a creative endeavour as making a metaphor, and as little guided by rules. (31)

By extension, Davidson's description of metaphor serves the 'dreamwork' of the short story, which draws the reader into generative participation.¹⁶ The complicity between reader and writer, and their agreement to participate in a shared creative endeavour, is one of the distinct pleasures of the short story.

8. On the Exploration of a 'Threshold Poetics'

I have already stated that what I am seeking in this thesis is a method of approach rather than a theory, and one explored through close textual analysis rather than survey, and there is a reason for these choices.¹⁷

Flannery O'Connor wrote that 'the whole story is the meaning, because it is an experience, not an abstraction' ('Nature and Aim' 73). In considering the nature of a 'threshold poetics' of the short story, I might describe my project as one that asks the question: 'How does the short story mean?' This is not a question that is reducible to single elements – component parts listed in a check box approach – because the meaning of a short story is indeed experiential: it is lived by the immersed reader. While a critical exploration cannot hope to duplicate the meaning of any work as experienced through reading, it is my hope that in considering the threshold charge of the short stories examined, I might go some way towards an engagement with meaning in the way O'Connor conceives it.

Jonathan Culler observes that 'works of literary criticism often combine poetics and hermeneutics, asking how a particular effect is achieved or why an

ending seems right (both matters of poetics), but also asking what a particular line means and what [. . . a work] tells us about the human condition (hermeneutics)' (*Literary Theory* 62). If 'poetics' is understood to '[start] with attested meanings or effects and [ask] how they are achieved' (62), it is not my intention in using the term to quantify threshold meaning reductively. As Culler suggests, an 'analogy between poetics and linguistics may seem misleading, for we [. . .] can't take meaning as a given but have to seek it' (63). Working with the hypothesis that the short story is a form charged by flux, the exploration of a 'threshold poetics' – involving consideration both of a threshold art and the study of that art – is intended to trace threshold activity while acknowledging the experience of the reader: both ultimately contribute to what might be described as the irreducible meaning of any work.¹⁸ 'Meaning,' O'Connor also wrote, 'is what keeps the short story from being short' ('Writing Short Stories' 95-96).

Therefore, rather than trying to fix a 'threshold poetics' of the short story as a concept with specific parameters, and having discussed metaphor as process itself in more depth, I would like now briefly to attribute those others who have influenced this project: one of seeking a greater understanding of threshold strategies and dynamics. In so doing, I am keen to point to areas of study that would bear further discussion were it not for the limits of this thesis, areas with potential for further research. In asking the question, 'How does the short story mean?' I am also asking, importantly, 'How *can* the short story mean?'

Peter Brooks suggests that '[t]hrough study of the work accomplished by fictions we may be able to reconnect literary criticism to human concern' (*Reading* xiv). While Brooks expresses reservations about narratology for 'static and limiting' models (xiii), I have found that for analysis of the short story on a sentence level, and in seeking to understand those 'internal energies and tensions, compulsions, resistances, and desires' (xiv) that charge this form, narratology's approach has been both helpful and inspiring, sharpening my understanding of the specificity with which one can engage with a text. It would be inaccurate to describe my thesis as one that takes a narratological approach overall. It is more fitting to acknowledge Isla Duncan's illuminating study of Alice Munro for introducing me to this approach to literature, along with the work of Gérard Genette, Gerald Prince and Shlomith

Rimmon-Kenan for further clarification of terms.¹⁹ I will later be discussing some of those strategies that foreground change and promote the metamorphic: for instance, the use of temporal shifts to disrupt and transform narrative, the metamorphic power of a single word repeated, and the way ellipsis can draw the reader into an active state of engagement with what is unknown, and perhaps unspeakable.

Iser describes '[c]ommunication in literature' as 'a process set in motion', and this sense of process is reflected in his discussion of intertextuality, indeterminacy, negations, gaps and blanks (*Prospecting* 34). Each involves those oscillations that are part of the "'As If world'" of fictionality (272). Iser's discussion of textual flux brings to mind Turner's evocative description of 'the subjunctive depths of liminality': of liminality's sheer 'potentiality' ('Social Dramas' 160, 161). The 'indeterminacy' of any text, Iser suggests, comes from its location in a 'peculiar halfway position between the external world of objects and the reader's own world of experience' (*Prospecting* 8). Gaps '[stimulate] the reader into filling the blanks with projections', so 'the unsaid comes to life in the reader's imagination' (*Act of Reading* 168). '[N]egation' Iser writes, 'invoke[s] familiar or determinate elements only to cancel them out. What is cancelled, however, remains in view, and thus brings about modifications in the reader's attitude toward what is familiar or determinate' (169). Finally, intertextuality sets in motion the unfolding of 'unforeseeably shifting relationships' (*Prospecting* 271). The 'simultaneity' of 'different types of discourse [. . .] triggers a reciprocal revealing and concealing of their respective contextual references' (271).

Repetition is described as '[t]he action of repeating something that has already been said or written, esp. in order to retain it in the memory, or as a literary device' (SOED). I will be drawing on Manuel Aguirre's, 'The Phasing of Form: A Liminalist Strategy in Fairytales', as I consider the way in which 'phasing' – a close but distinct cousin of repetition – encourages the multiplication and expansion of thresholds in text. Rooting his work in anthropology, and building discussion on the way 'tale-construction' mirrors tripartite ritual, Aguirre suggests that the progress of the subject in a narrative is delineated by multiple thresholds; these thresholds are created by the 'factoring of action into several versions of itself' ('Phasing' 20). The effect of such multiplication, Aguirre argues, is that 'phasing suspends the expected,

conventional flow of action, thereby holding it in a betwixt-and-between state, and giving it provisionality' (20). 'Phasing' effectively creates a 'phantom space' of the narrative: this liminal space existing 'in between the initial impulse and the final outcome' (20).²⁰

Finally, a host of critics and theorists, including Frank Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending* and Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot*, have considered the ways that narrative structure and expectation shape the short story – and indeed, our sense of being in the world. I will explore the supposition that narrative structure and expectation can and do play their part among the short story's threshold elements; that they are crucial to the 'live' dynamics of the form, and critical to our understanding of the short story as a form in debate with itself – as much as with the reader – through narrative and poetic interplay.²¹

9. Overview of Parts I and II.

Reviewing David Means for the *London Review of Books*, James Wood suggests that the writer 'seems to have absorbed Isaac Babel's advice about the killing importance of a perfectly placed full-stop' ('Overloaded'). There are echoes here of Carver too, earlier quoted for his intention to find: 'the right words, the precise images, as well as the exact and correct punctuation' ('Author's Foreword' xii). Both comments are relevant here, because in-depth analysis, or enquiry into the 'killing importance' of the work each writer does on the page, has been central to the methodological development of this thesis, allowing me to trace connections between broader thematic considerations of the short story as a liminal genre and those formal dynamics the short story writer can draw upon. Flannery O'Connor rejected theme outright as a dangerous summary approach to the work of the short story, and the development of this project has been a process of developing an understanding of the dialogue between theme and form – or, as O'Connor might have preferred, 'matter' and 'mode' – as they work to generate meaning ('Nature and Aim' 73, 65).

In my selection of writers, I have sought to represent both long established and much younger voices in the world of the contemporary short story. Each writer has been noted for their sophisticated understanding of the capacities of the form.

I open Part I with a focus on Alice Munro's 'Wenlock Edge' (*Too Much Happiness*) as a tale of unsanctioned initiation, one in which she stages a challenge to the dictates of traditional – or tripartite – narrative form. Exploring the notion of unsanctioned and incomplete rites of initiation, I consider how Munro gives expression to complex metamorphic experience by charting the deep ambivalence of coming of age. Munro's commanding use of threshold strategy in 'Wenlock Edge' incorporates a narrative circularity evidenced in the story's ending, which displays a splitting, a dual reference to past and future, a two-way tug. Any narrative resolution is undermined by evidence of the narrator's regression – her former self exists alongside the newer, disenchanted version. The lack of any complete transformation ensures that the tensions apparent throughout the text maintain their fraught dialogue; evidence is to be found in threshold metaphors, in wry intertextuality, in omission and in temporal shifts. The body plays a vital role in these shifts, animating a narrative studded with a young woman's interpretative crises, the text alive to its task. The sense of crisis spills over as a form of surplus – one closely allied with the body and the transgression of its boundaries.

Later in Part I, I widen my exploration of Munro's work, with a particular focus on the collection *Too Much Happiness*.

In Part II, I take the discussion of transgression forward, exploring the idea of the short story as a high stakes, 'life/death form' (Smith, 'All there is' 81). In 'Hiroshima' (*The Boat*), Nam Le explores the impact of the atom bomb, forging empathetic ties with the reader by locating the body of Mayako, a young girl, at the heart of the story. Le encourages the multiplication and expansion of thresholds in the text by drawing on the charged simultaneity of time past, present and future. He gives effective expression to this historical trauma as a liminal state, characterising it both as a state of suspension, and as a dynamic, metamorphic process. I explore the distinct way that 'phasing' can be understood as an element of a 'threshold poetics', marking the metamorphic process, while considering the ethics involved in Le's choice to engage with this historical moment.

While Nam Le employs temporal flux and simultaneity to explore the legacy of a known historical moment, in 'Railroad Incident, August 1995' (*Assorted Fire Events*), David Means draws on simultaneity and provisionality as he explores one

man's journey towards death. The protracted metamorphosis of his protagonist from a 'dainty man in a white dress shirt' (1) to a dead body stripped of identification is marked by an agony of textual flux. In a story whose very title intimates its own ending, Means establishes a playfully speculative relationship with both his reader and with the narrative act itself, postponing and undermining narrative resolution through the use of overt narrative interventions, multiple points of view, and the juxtaposition of alternative versions and outcomes. Means challenges the expectation of a straightforward linear progression, interrupting it in a plurality of ways, postponing the ending and maintaining multiple narrative tensions throughout.

10. The Short Story: 'Live' and Metamorphic

By examining liminality and the metamorphic in this way, I will be identifying threshold flux in the short story, and tracking the ongoing negotiations associated with this flux. In so doing I am proposing that the short story distinguishes itself as a 'live' form, one asking of the reader the agreement that it might shape-shift at any moment. A form as speculative as it is complicit, the dialogue it offers the reader evolves in the imaginative space.

Much has been implied in this introduction about the 'live' nature of the short story, and I want to be clear about my own understanding of this, which draws on several capacities – not least the sensate quality that many short story writers describe as key to the form. I consider it to draw both on the flux incorporate in the short story through threshold dynamics including metaphorical charge, and the flux in the relationship between writer and reader: that dual process of creation that is charged with ambiguity and draws on the commonality of physical life. I consider it to rest on the potential for a sense of the incomplete or unfinished, ensuring that the form's processual dynamic is ongoing beyond a narrative's end. And, finally, I consider the pull of narrative expectation a 'live' element in the short story; the presupposition of an ordered narrative journey serves to engender dialogue between form and formlessness.

At the conference *Liminality and the Short Story* in Wuerzburg, 2013, Dr Jochen Achilles raised the question, 'Where does liminality lead?' I believe this

question is implicitly related to the one I have put forward as central to this enquiry: 'How does – and how *can* – the short story mean?' Put another way, the question might be this: 'Where does liminality lead in the short story?' These questions are important, and relate as much to O'Connor's statement that '[m]eaning is what keeps the short story from being short' ('Writing Short Stories' 95-96) as to Wells Tower's belief in the 'excess meaning' of the short story ('Lit Show'): both point to the potentiality of a form that promises ongoing dialogue with the reader.

It is precisely because the short story bears this potential that it excites me – as a writer, reader and student – as a 'live' genre. Its uniquely metamorphic capacities make it suitable for the profound exploration of liminal states, engaging the body, mind and emotions. The form is capable of committing to these liminal states in an uncompromising way. Liminality in the short story might lead anywhere. The form retains the power to be '*both this and that*' ('Variations' 37).

The short story engages both with the way we experience the world, and the way we try to make sense of it, to create order. This constant negotiation is rendered potent by the form's compression, its dense layers, its simultaneities, and its troubling – often visceral – overflow. Meaning can communicate itself in the short story in the flux between 'matter' and 'mode' ('Nature and Aim' 65), body and mind, accord and discord. It is able to explore those constructs, those 'webs of significance' (Geertz 5) man uses to survive, while challenging them with 'excess meaning'.

Ali Smith has said:

The story form, it seems to me, in the century from which we've inherited it, is a discussion of what form is and how we are made. Not just how we make things but how we are made. And how we live. The dialogic element, the life of form and the form of life both become spotlighted in the story form. ('All there is' 81)

Combining method of approach with rallying cry, key for me here is the suggestion that the short story form is, in itself, a discussion, a dialogue. It is a 'live' and metamorphic form.

NOTES: INTRODUCTION

¹ I cannot claim to be the first to connect liminality to the short story. In a 2008 essay which is among the first liminalist studies to make specific reference to the short story form, Miriam B. Mandel describes the work of Ernest Hemingway as 'liminally oriented' (57), in part for the 'fraught relationship between fact and fiction' (54) involved, but also for the way his novels and stories work to keep 'language, genre, setting' and the reader 'within the liminal space' (58). See also Note 12 on Claire Drewery.

² At the time of writing neither Nam Le nor David Means have a significant body of critical work devoted to them, with the most notable exception being Philip Langeskov's 2013 doctoral study of Means. While a significant body of criticism is devoted to the earlier works of Alice Munro, I am focusing my study on her less studied later stories.

³ For considered appraisal of liminality as a critical tool and of its diverse and even contradictory nature, see Manuel Aguirre's 'The Lure of the Limen' in which he acknowledges the metamorphic nature of the threshold, which may be 'betwixt-and-between X and Y, both X and Y, or neither X nor Y' (10). 'Being a frontier' Aguirre writes, the limen 'generates change; or it is itself a changing site'; '[i]t is unstable, hence unreliable' (10).

⁴ Attribution is due to the SLL's study which concerns itself both with 'the poetics of the threshold' (Aguirre, Quance, and Sutton i) and 'the metaphor of the threshold' (10) in an interdisciplinary context. In the most recent of the series, SLL 8, *Liminal Poetics Or the Aesthetics of Dissent*, Belén Piqueras remarks that '[i]f delimiting a poetics is never an easy enterprise, it is even less so when its object is the threshold' (1). She suggests however that 'common [. . .] to all the poetics analysed [in SLL 8] is their questioning of borders and margins, their defiance of narrow categories and bounding formal patterns' (2). She claims that in these interdisciplinary studies 'a dynamic impulse articulates a partial or broad transgression and reassessment of formal paradigms' (3). See also Hein Viljoen and Chris N. Van der Merwe for a discussion of liminal poetics in a South African context.

⁵ Aristotle wrote of plot that '[a] whole is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end' (13). Frank Kermode describes the 'paradigmatic expectations' associated with the 'concordance of beginning, middle, and end which is the essence of our explanatory fictions' (*Sense of an Ending* 21, 35-36). I am assuming a paradigmatic connection between Van Gennep's notion of tripartite ritual form, and traditional narrative form or structure drawing on this convention of beginning, middle and end.

⁶ Of the liminal phase, Turner writes: 'The attributes of liminality or liminal *personae* ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial' (*Ritual Process*: 95).

⁷ See for example, 'Wild America' and 'Leopard' from *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned* (2009) by Wells Tower (149-184, 111-128), and 'Pilgrims' from *How to Breathe Underwater* (2003) by Julie Orringer (3-22).

⁸ Michael Trussler has recently suggested that Bakhtin's 'threshold chronotope' may be of use in the study of the short story as a genre ('Phenomenology' 148). The 'chronotope' has been defined by Michael Holquist as "'time-space'" or a 'unit of analysis for studying texts according to the ratio and nature of the temporal and spatial categories represented' (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 425). Trussler writes: 'While the threshold can be found in various types of narratives, it does appear that short fiction is often structured around this spatial/ temporal device at both the level of showcasing a central visual image of a physical threshold and as the dramatic situation that seems to give rise to narrativity' ('Phenomenology' 148). Ailsa Cox in fact explored the Bakhtinian chronotope in relation to the contemporary short story in her 1999 Ph.D. thesis. Her discussion of the body as a 'boundary zone' between inner and outer worlds is of interest here (94). 'Bakhtin claims [she writes] that the sense of a unique self is founded in the body's specific situation in space and time' (*Time and Subjectivity* 96).

⁹ Subha Mukherji writes of reading and writing as ‘activities that negotiate thresholds, even if in the form of a conscious effacing of demarcated boundaries’ (xviii). Mukherji identifies the threshold as ‘a place of rigour and work’ (xxiii).

¹⁰ Stephen Daedalus, the protagonist of Joyce’s unpublished novel *Stephen Hero*, describes epiphany as ‘a sudden spiritual manifestation’. Representing ‘the most delicate and evanescent of moments’, an epiphany implies the mind’s perception of ‘integrity, [. . .] wholeness, symmetry and radiance’ (216-217).

¹¹ The quotation comes from May’s article ‘Prolegomenon To A Generic Study Of The Short Story’ (463).

¹² One of the most dedicated liminalist studies of the short form to date is Claire Drewery’s 2011 exploration of the modernist short story and experimentalism: *Modernist Short Fiction by Women: the liminal in Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf* (the work has roots in her 2006 Ph.D. study of the same subject). Drewery describes ‘[t]he liminal condition’ as ‘a preoccupation with negotiating and transgressing boundaries’ (1).

¹³ The quotation comes from Chekhov’s story ‘Ward No. 6’ (210).

¹⁴ See, for example, *Metaphor and Figurative Language*: an extensive six-volume collection on metaphor from Aristotle and Roman Jakobson to contemporary cognitive psychology (Hanks and Giora).

¹⁵ Mary Rohrberger proposes that the short story ‘derives from the romantic tradition’, that ‘[t]he framework of the narrative embodies symbols which function to question the world of appearances’ communicating the ‘metaphysical view that there is more to the world than that which can be apprehended through the senses’ (‘A Proposed Definition’ 81). While I am in agreement that the short story form might be ‘a vehicle for the author’s probing of the nature of the real’ (81), I do not think that it should be divorced from the sensate, nor do I believe that its metaphorical power derives purely from narrative structure.

¹⁶ Clare Hanson projects a dream poetics for the short story, one informed by Lacanian theory in which ‘the image is identified with desire (the imaginary)’ (28), and acts as a metaphor for the repressed. ‘[S]tructured like a dream [. . .]’ Hanson writes, ‘the short work refuses to give us a world of law and order’ (31). She identifies the dream power of the short story in ‘its combination of the elements of familiarity and strangeness’ (27).

¹⁷ For a survey approach see for instance the statistical survey in Helmut Bonheim’s *The Narrative Modes: Techniques of the Short Story*, for which he studied a representative 600 short stories and 300 novels (191).

¹⁸ While Jonathan Culler observes that ‘poetics does not require that we know the meaning of a work; its task is to account for whatever effects we can attest to’ he also suggests that ‘a crucial part of poetics is an account of how readers do go about interpreting literary works – what are the conventions that enable them to make sense of works as they do’ (*Literary Theory* 63).

¹⁹ Duncan’s study is one of the most illuminating studies I have read of the work Munro does on the page, making specific, in terms of craft, what can to a reader seem alchemical.

²⁰ The ‘factoring of action into several versions of itself’ is critical to Aguirre’s distinction between ‘phasing’ and repetition; repetition he argues ‘inevitably highlight[s] the linguistic dimension’ (‘Phasing’ 20).

²¹ Peter Brooks writes: ‘Children quickly become virtual Aristotelians, insisting upon any storyteller’s observation of the “rules,” upon proper beginnings, middles, and particularly ends’ (*Reading* 3). Frank Kermode writes of the human ‘need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end’ (*Sense of an Ending* 4). Michael Trussler (‘Suspended’), Austin M. Wright

('Recalcitrance'), Thomas M. Leitch ('Debunking'), and Charles E. May ('Nature of Knowledge') have all considered ways the short story might be seen to engage with narrative expectation.

PART I

INITIATION: LIMINALITY AND THE METAMORPHIC IN ALICE MUNRO

'There was a movement back and forth, she said, there was a pulse in life. Her hope was that in this piece of writing she would discover what went on.'

Alice Munro

'Too Much Happiness' (TMH 301)

1. Introduction

The Canadian writer, Alice Munro, is arguably one of the most sophisticated short story writers working today. She has published thirteen collections of stories. In 2009 she won the Man Booker International Prize, and in 2013 The Nobel Prize for Literature. Harold Bloom has claimed her ‘permanence as a writer’ is assured, stating that she ‘joins the major artists of short fiction of the twentieth century’ (1).

Although there is a significant body of critical work devoted to Munro, as a short story writer who is also a Ph.D. student critically examining the form, I consider it appropriate to devote Part I to her work. Prior critical studies have generally focused on Munro’s earlier collections, and my own exploration will be of her more recent work – notably the collection *Too Much Happiness* (2009), but also *Runaway* (2004), and *Dear Life* (2012). With the exception of Isla Duncan’s 2011 study of Munro, the final chapter of which considers *Too Much Happiness* from a narratological perspective, few critical works have as yet been published on the later stories. As a reader and writer I have found among these stories not only some of the finest examples of what the form is capable of, but also some of the most memorable and viscerally affecting work I have read. Munro’s communication of overwhelming uncertainty, a disbelief in surface evidence and a radical instability relates to the study of liminality and the short form as much as to the projection of a ‘threshold poetics’ of the short story.

In a recent discussion of the ‘threshold chronotope’ in relation to the short story form, Michael Trussler suggested that ‘when we [. . .] consider the degree to which a contemporary short-story writer such as Alice Munro has spent a career creating stories that primarily revolve around sudden “moments of crisis” we can grant the descriptive value of the threshold to the genre itself’ (‘Phenomenology’ 148). While I am in agreement that Munro might be championed as one of the most sophisticated among contemporary writers for her engagement with the short story as a threshold form, I believe that she articulates what is both a more fluid and expansive state of crisis in her work than one communicated simply through singular ‘moments’. Trussler acknowledges that ‘some short stories depend on readers needing to imagine how the threshold experience will influence a given character’s

post-narrational existence' (149) and key to my exploration of Munro will be consideration of ways that she promotes hermeneutic excess in her work.¹

Munro herself has spoken of the way the disunity of the short form suits her perception and her understanding of perception in others:

Changing your perceptions of what is possible, of what has happened – not just what *can* happen but what really *has* happened. I have all these disconnected realities in my own life, and I see them in other people's lives. This was one of the problems – why I couldn't write novels, I never saw things hanging together any too well. ('Art of Fiction' 424)

On the elusive nature of the writing process she has said: 'I only seem to get a grasp on what I want to write about with the greatest difficulty. And barely' (408). She believes however that the process is about 'being totally alive to what this story is' (429).

While Munro is not generally overtly self-referential as a writer, a form of self-reflexivity is evident in her work: the quotation I have used to open this section is just one example, and comes towards the end of the title story of her collection *Too Much Happiness*. Although it is given to the main protagonist, Sophia, it can be read as a writer's statement of intent, and is not unrelated to Munro's metaphor of the 'house'; the 'movement back and forth' is suggestive of comparable shifts of perspective. The addition of the 'pulse in life' draws the body into the picture, while the hope that 'she would discover *what went on*' [my italics] is interesting for suggesting less a desire to endgame or to pinpoint, but more a puzzled and active curiosity, with an attendant desire to observe the dynamics at work; to study the nature of this 'movement back and forth', this 'pulse'.

Prior scholarship on Munro has identified certain characteristics in the author's earlier body of work that will be important in my own exploration: for instance, the play of paradox and ambiguity, and the use of layering.² There is also a wealth of critical work engaging with the role of the body in Munro: much of it is heavily gendered, dealing with Munro as a woman writing, as a woman's writer, and as a woman writing the female body into the text. Beverly Jean Rasporich claims that for Munro the 'body is the central metaphor of narrative structuring' (xvii). J. Brooks

Bouson's exploration of embodiments of femininity in Munro builds on ideas, by way of 'shame theorist' Paul Gilbert, that while "we may think of ourselves as individual minds or personalities, our existence can only take place in an embodied self" (7). Coral Ann Howells explores the role of 'bodyscape and landscape' (147) in Munro, while Ildikó de Papp Carrington, writing of dualities and 'splitting' (214), claims that the author's adoption of a 'double point of view' (206) has much to do with the pitting of the intellectual life against that of the body. Lorna Irvine believes the 'sense of ambiguous boundary' permeating Munro's fiction is so closely allied with the female body that 'it may be worthwhile to look at all of Munro's work as structural as well as contextual revelations of women's bodies [. . .]' (101, 110). With relevance to discussion of rites of passage and social process, she suggests: 'Munro's concentration on change seems to reveal not only aesthetic arguments about the stability of language and the difficulty of containing experience by words, but also a peculiarly female concern with bodily boundaries and with changing social structures' (104). Finally, with a focus on transformation pertinent to my own study, Irvine writes that Munro's 'fictions are filled with flux, with process, with the deceived eye and the altered landscape, with the almost indecipherable moment of metamorphosis rather than with its results' (99).

Two more recent studies stand out as particularly relevant to my enquiry into Munro's more recent body of work, and to my opening exploration of the story 'Wenlock Edge'.

Isla Duncan's narratological account of Munro mentions 'Wenlock Edge' only in passing, but it is striking how her close focus on the minutiae of Munro's stories in general opens – rather than limits – interpretative possibility. I have already noted Peter Brooks' reservations about narratology for promoting an overly delimited structural approach to literature, but Duncan's work is proof of the opposite, revealing the extraordinary tensions and energies alive in a multitude of choices made by Munro in the writing.

Conversely, Joanna Luft's predominantly structuralist reading of 'Wenlock Edge' as a recasting of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not only contingent on her use of the 2005 *New Yorker* version of the story, but also risks doing Munro's story a disservice for its determined focus on finding parallels between the two texts.

It should be noted that I am working with the revised 2010 version of ‘Wenlock Edge’ – the form Munro ultimately elected to publish in *Too Much Happiness* – and a fully comparative exploration of these versions is beyond the scope of this study. However, it is important to acknowledge Luft’s work, not least for the way it reflects on ‘Wenlock Edge’ as a project in hermeneutic terms.³

2. ‘Wenlock Edge’

2.1. Unsanctioned Initiation as Metamorphic Experience in ‘Wenlock Edge’

Isla Duncan describes ‘Wenlock Edge’ as a story about ‘sexual perversion and ritual humiliation’ (18). I am reading ‘Wenlock Edge’ as an incomplete rite of initiation, a coming of age all the more transgressive because it is unsanctioned, the humiliation involved all the more powerful for the private nature of the ritual concerned. In many respects mirroring a more traditional rite, and incorporating a form of tripartite narrative progression, it acts, I propose, as a queasy double. The initiate-narrator – a young student – does not find herself metamorphosing into a well-defined adult identity. While, nominally, she makes a bid for reincorporation in the world she had known at the outset of her journey, psychologically, emotionally, and viscerally, she remains in transition.

It will be helpful to give an outline of the story.

A nameless scholarship student dines every Sunday night with her mother’s bachelor cousin Ernie. Her routine life is thrown by the arrival of a new girl, Nina, in her rooming house. By her own account, at twenty-two Nina has been pregnant, married, and had three children, one of whom died. She has ended up at the university, encouraged by Mr Purvis, her elderly lover. She spends her weeks as a student, and weekends with Mr Purvis, who subjects her to certain rules dictated by him. An older woman, Mrs Winner, is employed to keep an eye on her. When on one occasion Nina skips her usual weekend visit to Mr Purvis, claiming to be sick, the narrator agrees to take her place. Without warning from Nina, she finds she is expected to dine with Mr Purvis, and to read to him – in both instances, naked. On her return to the rooming house she discovers Nina is gone. She has left to live with Ernie. Although, as Nina’s friend, the narrator is asked to keep her location secret,

she writes to Mr Purvis with Ernie's address, and within a week Nina is gone. The narrator resumes her Sunday night meals with Ernie.

In 'Wenlock Edge' any notion of stability is challenged from the start: contained worlds and coherent identities are undermined. Throughout the story the adult world features as an uncanny liminal realm in a way that affects the narrative journey and that of initiation. If the adult world is not a stable destination, if identity remains elusive, or hybrid, if adults are shape-shifters, then reincorporation into what Van Genep describes as a 'defined position' (3) becomes problematic. The notion of ever reaching the end of the journey is undermined, and narrative expectation thwarted.

In his discussion of initiation in the context of traditional rites of passage, Sam D. Gill describes a process of 'disenchantment with a naïve view of reality' in which 'one experiences a true death of the former self', a 'concrete transformation' (81). Central to my enquiry is the way resistance manifests in the text. It challenges the pull of narrative inevitability and with it the notion that any such 'concrete transformation' is possible.

I have discussed the idea of processual social form, after Turner, being reflected in 'live' text. In 'Wenlock Edge', themes of psychological, emotional and physical flux are echoed in textual strategies which not only assert the incomplete nature of the metamorphosis concerned, but also, through their very proliferation, push dialectical flux to a point of crisis, and thereby effectively communicate the crisis in this young woman's life.

2.2. Metaphor as Process and Metamorphic Experience in 'Wenlock Edge'

'Wenlock Edge' suggests that the process of coming of age does not align itself to any clearly defined structural progression, undermining even the notion of the physical metamorphosis to adulthood with suggestions of incompleteness, reversal and flux. The vestiges of childhood, in a number of Munro's characters, are never entirely shaken off.

Attendant with this unresolved physical process is the narrator's unresolved interpretative crisis; her initiation leaves her stranded in transition between worlds and modes of knowledge, all certainties undermined. Engaging both with the way the

narrator experiences the world through her body and the way she tries to create order through her mind, Munro forges form through a constant negotiation, insistently challenging anything as simple as a mind-body separation. In this way, the metamorphic experience of the text offered up to the reader-participant reflects that of Munro's narrator, incorporating a dense simultaneity. It is with Munro's use of metaphor that the reader is arguably most drawn into an elliptical imaginative space – rich with allusion and association, metamorphic and disturbing.

I have proposed that the story serves as a warped double to any publically sanctioned introduction to the body and society. '[N]eophytes in initiation [. . .]', Turner writes, 'may be represented as possessing nothing. They may [. . .] go naked, to demonstrate that as liminal beings they have no status' (*Ritual Process* 95). While traditional rites might incorporate forms of ritual dominance and humiliation, in 'Wenlock Edge', the wisdom of elders is all the more disturbing for the private nature of the ritual concerned. Whereas sanctioned rites would lead to reassuring reincorporation in society, nothing so straightforward happens here.

Transgression takes shape as an insistent force, lacing textual dynamics with a charge associated with what Mary Douglas describes as the danger of the liminal state (97). This visceral charge ensures a troubling legacy for the reader as much as for Munro's narrator.

In an encounter central to the story, Munro's scholar is confronted with a coming of age challenge reminiscent of the 'special acts' that Van Gennep identifies as key, in rites of passage, to 'progression from one group to the next' (3). Munro propels her neophyte into participation in an act both subversive and transgressive: disarmed by a feast of a supper, she is asked to read A. E. Housman's 'Wenlock Edge', a poem familiar from her studies, aloud to her unfamiliar, elderly host – and to do so naked, with her legs spread. Earlier in the story, and foreshadowing this central act, the host gives 'a demonstration of separating and removing the meat from the bones of a Cornish hen' (TMH 78). "It will fall apart more easily like this" (78) he says, as she sits naked at his table, her own skin basted in scented oil she had been told to use.⁴

A disturbing metaphor for the position the young woman finds herself in, the Cornish hen is pivotal in the story: an awful double in a text rife with doublings, a

shocking twin. Basted and naked, the narrator too is subject to the probing of the old man. While he approaches the hen with the educated decorum of knife and fork, he approaches the scholarship girl with a discussion of Plato, and although she does not realise it at the time, she is set up to be just as much under his control, just as decorously torn apart.⁵

The metaphor comes with associations free of the text, and also as the interpretative product of Munro's context. It takes shape as a monstrous metamorphic hybrid of woman's and hen's body, with attendant associations of touch, taste, smell, and those processes involved in preparation of the hen – the trussing, basting, cooking; the indignity of hen, legs akimbo, morphing to the powerlessness of legs bound. There are both visceral and interpretative associations: the safe domesticity of such a meal vying with the image of a woman, naked, captive – a woman trussed; a woman, legs akimbo; a woman coming apart.

The fact that the narrator is so oblivious to the dismantling that is taking place, as well as to the exact nature of the dispossession and transgression involved, is to be understood both through metaphorical process and through Munro's careful placement of the metaphor in the text. The ordering of events – the meal is *followed* by the reading when she sits naked, legs apart – ensures that metaphorical meaning gathers both incrementally and retroactively. The metaphor is embedded before fuller realisation of its significance filters through. The reader inhabits a processual interpretative space alongside the narrator. Just as for the narrator in her lived interpretative challenge meaning resides, confused and amorphous, in the space between body and mind, so for the reader neither the metaphor nor its interpretation takes discrete shape.

There are sly ironies alive here. As Munro plays with the juxtaposition of bookish and carnal knowledge and the dialectical flux between the two, she mirrors and subverts the didactic impulse the narrator earlier felt towards Nina in wanting to instruct her with library books (71). If she had felt herself gatekeeper to the world of bookish knowledge for Nina, she is blind to the process whereby Mr Purvis asserts himself as gatekeeper to both her body and mind. It is only later she understands that through her body the prized life of her mind has been transgressed upon, while simultaneously the body she had thought untouched has been violated.⁶

When the realisation comes, it is delivered as a body-mind conflation: ‘the lines began to assault me’ (88). Having asserted that ‘[he] did not lay a hand on me’ (81) and that it never struck her that ‘undressing might be a prelude to rape’ (76), the terms in which she recalls Housman’s poem are now suggestive of ‘[a] far greater shame’ (88). There has, after all, been real ‘damage’ (90). Interwoven with lines from the poem, her delayed response to Mr Purvis’s transgression draws directly on the language of sexual assault: ‘No. [. . .] No, never. [. . .] No. No. No’ (89). This language of resistance comes too late: her host’s own insistent “‘Yes,” [. . .] “Yes”” (80) came several pages earlier, when, we are led to assume, at the very least she agreed not to cross her legs.

Incorporating a queasy corporeal effect, something felt as deeply as it is thought, Munro is able to inhabit unspeakable terrain: Ricoeur’s borderlines of meaning. Her narrator, submitting control of both body and mind, proves herself a true neophyte, but the experience is made toxic by the embodied memory of transgression, the associations as ‘insistent, obscene’ (89) as the smell of the scented oil she had rubbed over her skin. These are associations Munro will draw on later in the story, when, after Nina’s final disappearance, Ernie produces one of her slips, smelling of the same scented oil. The narrator’s impulse to dispose of it in a waste bin in the restaurant bathroom confirms its symbolic power. For her it is sensory evidence, serving as affirmation of a troublingly embodied legacy of events. Nina’s slip, with its insistent scent, represents just the form of ‘excess meaning’ that Wells Tower describes: it is a tell-tale of indeterminacy.⁷

2.3. Threshold Strategies and the Herniation of Meaning

Munro works her young narrator’s crisis deep into the text. Layers of interpretation associated with the body, with landscape, and with playful intertextuality compound the sense of crisis, involving shifts of perspective and irresolution.

Metaphors of the threshold, introduced by the story’s very title, are active throughout.⁸ The narrator moves from the rooming house to a ‘basement cavern’, to a ‘hall dimly lit’, to the ‘windowless room [. . .] like a school cloakroom’, where she takes off her clothes (75). As she does, she recalls words from her valedictory address – ‘*Ave atque vale*’ (76): hail and farewell.

I want to turn now to Manuel Aguirre, who employs the term ‘phasing’ in his study of the ‘multiplication of action’ (‘Phasing’ 14), the term alluding both to Van Gennepe’s delineation of tripartite progression and to the way the liminal phase is further broken down: ‘factoring [. . .] action into several versions of itself’ (20). He writes:

Phasing stalls action, catches and holds it ‘in the act’, as it were, stresses its processual nature, makes it *visible* as process. Much like the technique of slow motion in cinema, phasing suspends the expected, conventional flow of action, thereby holding it in a betwixt-and-between state, and giving it provisionality. (20)

Aguirre makes a clear distinction, in the case of fairytales, between reiterative – especially triplicative – action, and linguistic or verbal repetition. However the narrative potential of this ‘provisionality’ does relate to the dense threshold activity in ‘Wenlock Edge’. It is live in a threshold charge that reiteratively weds theme to textual strategy, creating of the story an ongoing interpretative threshold. An active suspension is apparent in the tensions at work, ensuring that there can be, in this case, no true resumption of the ‘conventional flow of action’. The processual action of coming of age is rendered protracted, suspended: there is no ‘concrete transformation’ (Gill 81), no full metamorphosis. By the story’s end, the liminal realm is extended, and threshold experience is ever more expansive. I will further discuss these dynamics in relation to Nam Le’s ‘Hiroshima’.

In ‘Wenlock Edge’ the doubled perspectives associated with threshold crossings are accompanied by doubled and multiple identities: Munro’s reference to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is no matter of chance; shape-shifting is at its heart. Ernie is a man-child, ‘clean as soap’ (62); Nina a girl-child, and also a lover, mother, student, and a comfortable ‘we’, with Ernie (86). The narrator is furthermore presented with a bewildering array of role models – taking shape in miserable motherhood, date-obsessed contemporaries, and Mrs Winner’s hardened peroxide blonde.

Surrounded by multiple versions of womanhood, she is immersed too in a multitude of texts. Munro’s wry engagement with intertextual thresholds announces itself up front with the title, and the story is dense with overt reference and allusion. These include ‘the Condensed Books of the Reader’s Digest’ (63), *The Scarlet Letter*

(71), and the concept of the cave from Plato's *The Republic* (78) – this last alone replete with associations of the real-unreal, the visible-invisible, the solid-fluid. Such a pronounced engagement operates on many levels. While Munro undermines a crib sheet approach to real life, pitting bookishness against carnal knowledge, she also laces her own story with vying versions of reality.

When shifts of perspective happen so rapidly that disorientation seems inevitable, the reader is in his or her own way doubling the narrator's journey, and the threshold activity, the border crossings of the short story, become all the more effective. The uncanny realisation that something has *already* happened, and the attendant, retroactive, retracing of steps: this, in Munro, is particularly powerful. When the narrator says, 'He had done something to me, after all' (88), she is giving voice as much to the reader's experience as to her own.

Textual gaps – whether ellipsis, omission, or temporal leaps – serve as interpretative gaps. They work disorientation into the reading experience, and may be temporary or lasting, maintaining their power even retroactively. The following lines are central to the reading scene, and combine omission with repetition:

I said that I would read.

“And may I ask you please—may I ask you please—not to cross your legs?”

My hands were trembling when I took the book from him.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes.” (80)

Much is implied, but the gaps in the text leave space for uncertainty, in this case all the more powerfully for the nature of the transgression involved. Though the reader gauges that, probably, he did not touch her, that uncertain space is live and troubled with threshold activity. The reader is companion to the narrator by inhabiting an interpretative threshold, while, as imaginative participant in the act of violation, they double as victim and voyeur.

Repetitions and multiplications reiterate thematic intent. A process is at work; nothing is mere duplication. The narrator's forceful utterance, 'No. [. . .] No, never. [. . .] No. No. No' (89), coming later in the story and some while after the event itself, works both as retroactive resistance and as attempted denial. Interwoven with lines from Housman's poem, its insistence as a statement is undermined with each

resurrection. The repetition confirms the damage, the psychological and emotional insistence of the violation. The flux of the resistance-insistence associated with the transgression remains live in the temporal tug of war between a past revisited and reimagined and the knowledge the narrator must bear. The sequence serves as a projection, too. Those repetitions push meaning just as insistently towards the future, the threshold assertions multiple and expansive.⁹

Joanna Luft considers, in great depth, intertextual connections between 'Wenlock Edge' and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, with a particular interest in the structural technique of 'embôitement' (103). While Luft does acknowledge other aspects of intertextual play at work in the story, she focuses so heavily on this perceived influence of *Sir Gawain* that her analysis risks reductionism.¹⁰ In a related but perhaps less limiting claim, Charles E. May suggests that a defining shift in the short story form took place in the nineteenth century, with the introduction of a dialectic of romance and realism. He writes that '[c]haracters in short fiction [. . .] are both social personae in a realistic fiction and symbolic projections in a romance fiction' ('Metaphoric' 66), and describes a 'process whereby both realistic motivation and romantic projection transform the old romance story into the new short story discourse' (67). While May pays due respect to the tensions provoked by such interplay, he concludes his discussion of the short story's hermeneutic quest and its resolution in the following way:

"Who am I?" As opposed to the novel, the short story says one does not find the answer to that question in a similitude of the real world, but rather by being caught up within the role that the story demands and being therefore metaphorically transformed – so that one finds oneself by losing oneself. (73)

I use the word 'quest' to highlight the way May projects a form of hermeneutic expectation here: the expectation of an end and an answer. Metaphorical transformation, he seems to suggest, ultimately serves the purpose of re-determination and clarification: of finding oneself. More pertinent to Munro is his suggestion that:

In many contemporary, self-reflexive short stories, [...] the conflict between fiction and reality becomes the self-conscious conflict of the characters. Characters become inextricably enmeshed in their own dual fiction-reality status; the two realms entangle to suggest that all existential dilemmas are fictional, just as all fictional dilemmas are existential. (66)

I will return to Munro's engagement with this interplay of the fictional and the real later, but for now I want to return to her use of intertextuality which, I would argue, rather than binding 'Wenlock Edge' to one text or structural frame of reference, works to extend and enhance the metamorphic dynamic in the story. Each new reference serves not to supplant previous references but to join them: each is yet another manifestation of what Aguirre, Quance and Sutton describe as 'worlds – or world-views – in contest' (10). One of the great pleasures of 'Wenlock Edge' is witnessing how lightly yet purposefully Munro fosters intertextual play in the story: a play denied the reader should they focus on just one textual relationship. The plural nature of these references works to reiterate intention, both extending and expanding interpretative possibilities.

If the short story can bewilder as a form by seeming at times to play cat-and-mouse with the reader; if, arguably, it is a form rather like poetry where the reader benefits from understanding, even a little, the nature of engagement that might be demanded from them, intertextual reference of this kind is the most deliberate offering a writer can make. It is not accidental that Munro refers to Housman, Catullus, Plato, Gawain and Hawthorne, and the references sit in the story like parcels waiting to be unwrapped.¹¹ A reader might consider such references mere wallpaper appropriate to the world of any young student of literature. However, located as they are within a story that promotes the questioning of identity and reality to such a great extent, it is much more tempting to consider them as invitations, as incitement to participate; as an index, even, for the mode of participation required.

Iser writes that '[t]he law of shift of ideas is in fact a continual rearrangement of the attributes of reality' (*Prospecting* 268), and in 'Wenlock Edge', Munro calls upon the reader as participant in the rearrangement of reality. By engaging with those shared references we are given the power to become the makers and destroyers of worlds. In this way the reader is offered a double role. As participant, they process not only each reference, but an accumulation of references, which all interact to generate new meaning, giving them access to a bewilderment of interpretative possibilities purely on this intertextual level. As reader, however, they are also in the privileged position of witnessing the way in which this interpretative bewilderment suffuses the story as a whole: they are party, along with the writer, to the ironies alive in the oscillations between worlds and world-views. If the fragility of such worlds

becomes apparent in the ease with which one text appears to challenge another, the reader is able to respond to this fragility with a double identity. Given the chance to relate closely both to the narrator's own interpretative challenge and to a more privileged interpretative perspective, the narrative space they are offered promotes oscillation between empathy and knowingness, proximity and distance.

This tonal flux is a constant in Munro's work, and very much in evidence in *Too Much Happiness*, as I will later discuss. The combination of coolness and empathy ensures that she bypasses sentimentality, while never losing a connectedness; the sense that events are explored from the inside out, as well as from the outside in. Munro's doubled perspective means that in spite of such tonal coolness, her work is neither didactic nor imperious. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the unequivocal importance of thresholds in Munro's work, divisiveness has no place in stories requiring such a degree of involvement – of collusion even – through reader response. We are all, Munro suggests, implicated.

By claiming that the fictional acts 'as bearer for something else', carrying with it 'whatever has been left behind' as 'a potential presence' (277), Iser effectively evokes the dense layered activity related not only to Munro's use of intertextuality, but at work throughout 'Wenlock Edge'. Considering the interaction of worlds, and of discourse he writes:

From this interplay there emerges a semantic instability that is exacerbated by the fact that the two sets of discourse are also contexts for each other, so that each in turn constantly switches from background to foreground, becoming a theme viewed from the standpoint of the other and vice versa. The resultant dynamic oscillation between the two ensures that their old meanings now become potential sources for new ones. The text itself becomes a kind of junction where other texts, norms, and values meet and work upon each other; as a point of intersection its core is virtual, and only when actualized – by the potential recipient – does it explode into its plurivocity. (271)

It is worth quoting in full for the fact that it articulates so much of the work of Munro's text – and Munro's text is doing so much: the intertextuality, the doubling of worlds at thresholds, the protean quality of metaphor, together creating just the plurivocity that Iser describes. What is particularly effective here is his acknowledgement of the role of the reader, without whom all of this activity is

merely latent, but with whom the writer conspires to do more than simply present two or more worlds side by side, but to explode worlds into multivalence.

The body, in 'Wenlock Edge', animates this multivalence. The dialectics of vying versions of identity and forms of experience cumulatively assert that the formation of identity – and the metamorphosis to adulthood – is a bewildering, endless process. It involves complex, on-going negotiations between layered social interactions and presuppositions, and forms of knowledge both intellectual and sensate. The ensuing sense of crisis spills over as a form of excess, one closely allied with the body and the transgression of its boundaries, establishing a troubling legacy, haunting and metamorphic.

3. Where Does Liminality Lead?

I want to return to the question of where liminality leads in the short story. As I have already suggested, it is not an abstract line of enquiry but one implicitly related to the question of how the short story conveys meaning.

Sally Falk Moore and Barbara Meyerhoff write that 'indeterminacy is always present in the background of any analysis of ritual', and that ritual is 'a declaration of form *against* indeterminacy' ('Secular' 17). Of ceremony they write:

It banishes from consideration the basic questions raised by the made-upness of culture, its malleability and alterability. [. . .] [I]t seeks to state that the cosmos and social world, or some particular small part of them are orderly and explicable and for the moment fixed. (16)

Munro's 'Wenlock Edge' lends itself to such discussion, and not least because it incorporates a form of tripartite narrative progression as in traditional rites of passage: in broad terms, the narrator leaving familiar surroundings, journeying to enter a liminal world, and then returning to those familiar surroundings, changed by her experience. Munro's great achievement with the story is that she works with a dialogue of form and indeterminacy to the extent that the 'made-upness' of the form involved is fully exposed, but without ever losing the powerful potential it carries: the promise of the 'orderly and explicable' and 'fixed'.

I have suggested that 'Wenlock Edge' reads as a transgressive, unsanctioned rite of initiation. As a queasy double existing in a form of dialogue with those expectations attached to traditional, sanctioned rites, it carries, in spite of its darkness, the hope and expectation of a return home to stability, reassurance and reincorporation. The story is all the more effective for incorporating this dialogue, which builds to put tremendous pressure on the return home and the meal with Ernie to make things right: to offer sanctuary in the 'culturally determinate, the regulated, the named' (16). However, the queasy doubling carries through here: the meal with Ernie cannot help but exist in dialogue with the meal with Mr Purvis and all that it represents. Munro is making the most of form, and of narrative expectation – keeping it alive in the reader's mind, while also managing to challenge it throughout. The narrative is given added agency by those expectations summoned. The sad and hollow ritual of the final meal with Ernie is all the more troubled and revealing for the knowledge of what it might have offered, but doesn't and can't. Whether viewed in terms of the reader's associations of traditional rites and narrative progression with the promise of closure, or viewed through Munro's narrator and her hope of the reassurance of some kind of a return home, such doubling highlights both the potent promise narrative form carries, and the potency of such form undermined. The rites in 'Wenlock Edge' are unsanctioned, incomplete and unresolved, yet carry with them the shadow of form, a masquerade of completion.¹²

There is the danger, always, with any discussion that focuses on narrative structure alone, of reducing the short story to a closed system. If the assertion of narrative structure mimics well-defined ritual in 'a declaration of form *against* indeterminacy' ('Secular' 17), one might argue that it is through the insistent 'subjunctive antistructure of the liminal' that the short story 'transcends its frame' (Turner 'Social Dramas' 159, 156). While I have no interest in forcing a fit between any anthropological model and 'Wenlock Edge', Turner's amended conception of social dramas as *process* incorporates a pertinent adjustment to the traditional tripartite structure of rites of passage. With *four* phases overall, labelled 'breach, crisis, redress, and *either* reintegration *or* recognition of schism' (145), Turner projects a process that incorporates not one but *two* closural outcomes, thereby acknowledging that in the case of social crisis, reintegration is at times not achieved.¹³

Munro, seemingly determined not to let her scholarship girl off the hook, incorporates in the story's ending – in Turner's terms – a doubling of *both* reintegration *and* recognition of schism. Finding form in the Sunday night meal with Ernie, the narrator's make-believe of reintegration is transparently self-defeating, ineluctably carrying its own double in the haunting absent-presence of the meal with Mr Purvis. Munro's structural choice here incorporates a sense of return or reintegration as playfully subversive, and as memorably dissonant, as her use of intertextuality, of gaps and omissions, and of threshold metaphor. Everything, it seems, has a double, assuring a metamorphic flux and agency to the whole.

Furthermore, when Turner considers the role of those 'adjustive and redressive mechanisms' that serve to promote reintegration, and 'to limit the contagious spread of breach' (147), he does Munro no disservice, and not only in his evocative use of language: 'breach' implying not only '[t]he action of breaking' but also '[a] break or fissure', 'a gap', and a contravention or violation (SOED).¹⁴ This live dynamic of resistance and redress working against the threat of 'breach' is one that Munro explores and harnesses in 'Wenlock Edge'. When the narrator mutely bundles Nina's scented slip into the trash, it is in a companion action to that mute yet reiterative exclamation of resistance earlier discussed: 'No. [. . .] No, never. [. . .] No. No. No' (89). It is a private act of redress in response to a private humiliation, and in response to the touch of contagion in the scent of the slip, with its attendant, transgressive associations. With such a private form of contagion, there is no sanctioned public mechanism that might help the narrator to reintegrate, and her redressive measures are successful only superficially.¹⁵ Munro communicates that where body memory is implied, 'the contagious spread of breach' is not so easily controlled: neither through the disposal of the slip, nor with the attempted erasure of Nina herself through the betrayal of her whereabouts to Mr Purvis, nor indeed through the return to Sunday night dining with Ernie, is the narrator able to convincingly shake off the accompaniment of unease, the private contagion, the sense of excess. Each action serves rather to illustrate the persistence of the liminal state.¹⁶

Ali Smith has said that while 'because of its size' the novel 'has to be held in some kind of linear structure' with a 'progression from beginning to middle to end', the

short story 'keeps a very different kind of time' ('All there is' 71). The short story form, she says, 'is completely wide open. Its end is never an end, it's always some kind of middle or beginning. [...] It's a different kind of journey' (68). I think Smith is acknowledging something important about the compression of the form, and the way it can promote disorder even while it might, at face value, be promoting order. I do believe that the short story has the capacity to incorporate a powerful contradiction that plays off tripartite and linear expectation: the contradiction that there *both* is *and* isn't narrative progression. 'Wenlock Edge' is a good example of this.

Aguirre speaks to Smith's notion of 'a different kind of journey' when he describes the effect of 'phasing' as the '[creation of] a phantom space, or, in Turner's words, "a place that is not a place" in between the initial impulse and the final outcome' ('Phasing' 20). I will return later, in my discussion of 'Hiroshima', to the implications of such a liminal and 'phantom space' for chronological time, but for now I would simply like to point to the fruitful contradictions involved here: Aguirre's 'phantom space' possesses a textual agency which is neither phantom nor insubstantial; it combines the focused drive of telic expectation, with its associations of ordered progression, along with the 'provisionality' of 'a liminal status' (21).¹⁷ Turner makes the claim that manifestations of liminality and social structure are 'mutually determinative' (*Ritual Process* 127).¹⁸ Just as in discussion of ritual process there can be no talk of liminality without attendant talk of structured progression, in discussion of the short story there can be no talk of liminality without talk of narrative expectation and progression.

Michael Trussler suggests that 'short stories [. . .] maintain that the narratives we tell ourselves often mask the incongruities of existential experience' ('Suspended' 561). Charles E. May points to the flawed conceptual constructs exposed by the short story form. Suggesting that the short story poses a challenge to man's 'drive to order', his will to 'maintain his ordered experience', he writes:

[T]he short story is closer to the nature of reality as we experience it in those moments when we are made aware of the inauthenticity of everyday life, those moments when we sense the inadequacy of our categories of conceptual reality. ('Nature of Knowledge' 141-2)

Similarly, Thomas M. Leitch identifies the short story's capacity, in moving 'from a false sense of certainty to a more authentic sense of uncertainty' (133), to articulate '[that] one's identity is either forced on one or is the product of vain illusion' (138). Focusing on the American short story, Leitch draws attention to the way the 'structure of these stories is based on the process of unmaking or unknowing the stable, discrete self defined in opposition to the world of other selves and other experiences' (134). He further suggests that tales of initiation or coming of age serve as a template not only for many American short stories, but also, by extension, for short stories and novels in general, as 'the unmarked mode of modern narrative' (146). According to Leitch, not only does such a template determine that stories 'typically render the hero's identity problematic without substituting an equally stable conception of the world or of one's public identity', but that for several writers, working at its very best, the short form 'emphasizes the antithetical structure of challenge over any concluding integration or resolution' (134, 140).

Pure antithesis, however – described as 'the movement from one belief or situation to its opposite' – seems too simplistic, too neat a hypothesis for Munro, if it is understood to suggest 'an exhaustive demarcation of boundaries and so the conclusion of the story's investigation or survey of the world' (132).¹⁹ What is interesting in Munro is her maintenance of a pulse between stability and instability, structure and anti-structure: the two playing off against each other in perpetual dialogue. Rather than communicating either an overly neat conclusion and closure, or, conversely, the 'existential suspicion that human existence is meaningless' (138), Munro achieves something both rather more sophisticated and rather more humane, and this I will return to later.

In fact both linearity and circularity are evident in Munro's ending; the push towards closure – Kermode's 'sense of an ending' – is both thwarted and fulfilled.²⁰ While telic expectation is ever present in 'Wenlock Edge' as a force, Munro's narrator becomes caught in circularity. She responds to the events that have left her so deeply affected by engaging in a transparent game of make-believe: make-believe that none of this ever happened, make-believe we are back at the start. This new beginning inevitably carries with it all that has come before, and likewise all that is to come. Though the narrator is in the same restaurant, with Ernie, and inhabiting – at face value – the same ritual meal, it *both* is *and* isn't the beginning, creating of the

story what Mary Rohrberger has described as a loop: ‘The amazing thing about the short story’ she writes, ‘is that beginning and end make a strange loop: beginning is end, and end is also beginning’ (‘Origins’ 11).²¹ Moreover, to go back to the start, to make-believe that events never happened might be said to resurrect the narrative with a new power, creating for the story at its ending a pronounced expectation closer to painful anticipation, a form of telic dread: for, back at the beginning, we know where this is going. The sense of the narrator’s entrapment in an unpleasant state of limbo is palpable, such an interplay of linearity and circularity working together with the insistent, sentence-level threshold strategies already discussed, as much as with the queasy corporeal sense of excess, to create a troubling and haunting experience for the reader too. I will further explore the idea of Munro’s proof of transgression later. For now, I will suggest that such threshold dynamics serve as evidence of the ‘subjunctive antistructure of the liminal’ (‘Social Dramas’ 159).

Peter Brooks, in *Reading for the Plot* – a study of narrative ‘as a dynamic operation’ – describes the way ‘the desires that connect narrative ends and beginnings [. . .] make of the textual middle a highly charged field of force’ (xiv). While any discussion focusing exclusively on narrative takes certain risks, it is a valuable reminder of the potency of those expectations attending narrative structure and progression. Moreover, while Brooks is writing of narrative and not of the short story, his description of the metamorphic agency of the textual middle as ‘the place of transformation’, with its ‘movement, [. . .] slidings, [. . .] mistakes, and partial recognitions’ (92) relates to the short story. As a liminal form its dynamics might even be described in those terms Brooks reserves for the textual middle alone.

I want to return to Smith’s description of the short story form: ‘Its end is never an end, it’s always some kind of middle or beginning. [...] It’s a different kind of journey’ (‘All there is’ 68). It is relevant here for suggesting her awareness of traditional formal progression as existing in relation to another version: one which makes no promise of order at all. What Smith describes as ‘the relationship [. . .] between an unfolding chaos and an unfolding meaning’ (70) in the short story draws us back to one of the form’s great contradictions: that it can simultaneously foreground structure *and* indeterminacy. It is a contradiction that lends the form tremendous hermeneutic power.²² Smith is right to suggest that the reader should expect ‘a different kind of journey’. In so doing, she speaks directly to the short story

as a liminal form: one that can maintain an open and ongoing conversation on form and formlessness, on progression and regression, without any imperative to stop the playful flux. As she is suggesting, this can mean that along with the sense of linear progression, chronological time can be radically thrown, leading the reader to inhabit a challenging fictional space which claims the prerogative to remain indeterminate and metamorphic. I will be exploring the implications of time as chronology and time as simultaneity in Part II.

I would suggest that the short story is capable of such compression that the sense of 'is and isn't' associated with narrative, with this negotiation of chaos and meaning, can lead to such feverish and pressurised debate within the story that the form effectively embraces a state of 'subjunctive antistructure'. Where does liminality lead? In the case of Munro, it leads both everywhere and nowhere: nowhere because in traditional terms – part of a unifying process working towards a known end – it is exposed as a fraud, and everywhere because as a quality it remains live in the memorable dissonance of the work of the text, live in the dialogue between writer and reader, live in the imagination of the reader long after the book is set down. 'Wenlock Edge' succeeds because the dissonance generated is so memorable, and it is memorable because Munro exploits the oscillations that are as alive in narrative expectation as they are in the reiterative textual strategies employed on a sentence level. The effect of this dissonance is a paradox in itself: Munro's masterful eloquence as a short story writer is evident in her ability to arrest the reader through threshold flux. Liminality remains live in arresting dissonance, commanding reiterative acts of attention.

If the human experience is metamorphic, involving body, mind and emotion, with none only self-referential, but each bearing traces of the other, then Munro's great achievement in her best work is that she manages to capture this live, to set it down without rendering it static, without diminishing it.

4. The Body, Perception and the Metamorphic in Alice Munro

4.1. *Too Much Happiness*

Having focused on 'Wenlock Edge' itself, I would like to consider the collection it comes from as a contextual whole.

Observation of the flux of life is crucial to Munro's writing – and is in itself a live gesture: reiterative, self-reflexive. As a collection, *Too Much Happiness* combines acts of empathetic extension with an open attention. Munro's attention may be quizzical or caustic, amused or ironic, but key to her ability to maintain a pulse in her work is the fact that she doesn't seek to offer solutions. She chooses to keep quandaries alive. Though she presents an uncompromising vision of human behaviour, she does not write with judgement or moral agenda. Her vision combines empathy with a gimlet-eyed clarity and sobriety. This is not least because her exposure of the commonality – one might even say necessity – of false perceptions and 'deliberate frauds' (TMH 294) pays such active tribute to the complexity and vulnerability of human concerns.

In many of the stories that make up *Too Much Happiness*, there is evidence that a shift in perception can be transformational, opening characters to new possibilities – and, at times, even saving their lives. In such cases, the truth or fraud of the perceptions involved can seem almost immaterial.

In 'Dimensions', Munro marks the emotionally metamorphic experience of a woman – Doree – whose children have been murdered. Offered help by the murderer, her husband, albeit in a questionable form, she is able to begin a process of emotional recovery. The hope he offers – through the vision he has had of their children alive in another dimension – makes the world inhabitable: it is a lie necessary for Doree to find her way out of emotional limbo.

I have mentioned my interest in the body as a context for liminal states and as both conduit to, and extension of, the psychological and emotional realms, and it is a mark of Munro's sophistication as a writer that she is able to represent the connectedness of body, mind and emotion so effectively. A transformational shift of perception in Munro gives expression to complex internal processes, while it is often extended to find an externalised form that is mediated, and inhabited, by the body in the world.

In 'Dimensions', if a new form of perception offers Doree 'refuge', it is from physically charged thoughts of her children which attack, 'like a knife to her throat' (27). This perceptual refuge, while arguably a madman's fraud, enables her to feel once again alive and participant. Her reconnection to others is then viscerally affirmed in the story's final sequence, when, giving the kiss of life to an accident victim, she focuses all of her attention on signs of life – the body's pulse, its 'duty to breathe' (31). It is at this moment that her act of extension to the boy she is trying to save becomes transformational, and she observes that it is 'as if she were the one whose breath was precious' (31). If this moment, this breath, serves as a visceral marker for her release back into the world, and from a form of emotional limbo, it is enabled by her earlier choice to believe an improbable fiction – one that she withholds from her counsellor, not wanting it to be exposed and diminished as the 'craziness', the 'dangerous nonsense' it most likely is (26). The choice to collude – psychologically, perceptually – in a flawed act of world creation is in this case redemptive. By choosing to inhabit a form of mental limbo, in the perceptual flux between 'real' and fictional worlds, Doree is able to access both a new physical and emotional state.

Munro's vision as a writer can be lacerating, but it is a vision not without hope, and if one of her great strengths is the devastating exposure of roles played and frauds perpetuated, it is through the related observation of the metamorphoses of perceptual worlds that she identifies the hopeful agency that can be associated with acts of world creation.

In the story 'Free Radicals' a change of perspective proves, quite literally, life-saving. It is through an empathetic leap to inhabit the mind of the woman whose husband she stole, that Nita escapes death at the hands of a criminal. Ironically she does so by spinning a fiction in which she imagines herself – Nita, the 'home wrecker' (119) – murdered by the woman she wronged. Earlier in the story Munro gives Nita the words: '[s]he hated to hear the word "escape" used about fiction. She might have argued [. . .] that it was real life that was the escape. But this was too important to argue about' (122). In Nita's case, as in Doree's, however, fiction serves a double, paradoxical purpose; it is both a means of escape and of deliverance back into 'real life'.

Whether fiction works to represent something closer to the truth, as Nita implies, and real life is the fraud, or whether fraudulent fictions or flawed perceptions offer deliverance back to real life, fiction's metamorphic dynamics are clearly important to Munro. In 'Some Women', deception is a fraud both kind and cruel – a dying man pretends that his own wife's company is preferable to that of the woman who is now most able to make him happy, thus denying himself the greater comfort as he prepares for death. In 'Too Much Happiness', an act of kindness extended to a woman soon to die – the provision of a mind-altering medicine – is double-edged. Sophia is a woman alert to any 'deliberate frauds' (294), such as seeking solace in God, and has shaped her life through mental acuity. However, having taken the drug, the altered perception she experiences in her final hours, while depriving her of her 'right' mind, offers solace in place of suffering. She enters a state in which she experiences an expansion, a transformation, a 'change of perception' (298) that leaves her 'overflowing with ideas' and with happiness in her final hours (301).

Munro's writing, to draw on Wells Tower's metaphor, comes with a high 'thread count' ('Lit Show'): the internal and external worlds her characters inhabit are interwoven, while a complex braiding of body, mind and emotion is also at work. The density she achieves can produce a pronounced obfuscation of boundaries, confirming just how much any sense of reality is shaped, and muddled, by the perpetual interaction of inner and outer worlds. She profoundly communicates the degree to which those realities we inhabit are perceptual projections. If inner and outer landscapes are metamorphic, it is in part due to the shifting nature of perception.

In 'Wood', for instance, Munro explores a marriage affected by a wife's debilitating depression, giving expression in particular to the husband's consciousness of his wife's state by interweaving landscape, body and mind. Injured while felling trees, the man, Roy, has to crawl to get out of the woods, retracing the steps he left in the snow on his way in. On hands and knees, physically diminished, in a form of limbo, he finds new perspective and acceptance – a kind of mental reprieve. When he reaches the edge of the woods he discovers his wife, Lea, waiting for him, mysteriously released from her own mental limbo, and having come to find him, 'as if she'd never given up driving at all' (242-3). The simultaneous shifts of perception in the couple are implied to be matters of chance – Lea had no premonition of an

accident, but had merely turned up. However, a connectedness establishes itself between the mental state she has been in, and the perceptual shift that occurs in Roy, who now views the wood he has crawled through as less familiar and less classifiable than he had previously thought: 'How tangled up in itself it is, how dense and secret. It's not a matter of one tree after another, it's all the trees together, aiding and abetting each other and weaving into one thing. A transformation, behind your back' (245). If his perception here reads as a metaphorical projection of the state of mental obfuscation his wife has experienced, it has also – having taken shape as an actual landscape that he himself had to negotiate – served as a form of physical double for that state. It would be inaccurate, however, and a little cosy for Munro to suggest that such empathetic extension implies a neat convergence of man and wife in a new and shared perceptual and physical space. There is nothing simplistic about the connectedness of the transformations involved. This change – this improvement in Lea – Roy feels, in fact implies a loss of some kind for him, one 'he'd be ashamed to admit to' (244). In place of an empathetic convergence and shared understanding, there is an unexplained – and perhaps unexplainable – dislocation.²³ The story startles by coming so close to the offering of a good, shared feeling yet steering clear, and is all the more unnerving and thought-provoking for this play of psychological and emotional proximity and distance.

In a good number of the stories in *Too Much Happiness*, Munro explores attempts at empathetic extension towards others: these are sometimes kind, sometimes hopeful, but often inadequate or deeply flawed. Our understanding of each other, our attempts at connection, for Munro, so often fall short. In 'Face' an important childhood friendship is ruined by a misjudged prank, when a young girl paints one side of her face red to mirror the livid birthmark of her friend. In a later act of remorse and emotional transfiguration, she cuts open her own face so that it will match his. Both attempts at physically doubling her friend are wrong-headed and grotesque, while as forms of over-extension they are transgressive, breaking the bounds of acceptable empathy, involving an uneasy sense of excess.

In these stories forms of metaphorical and conceptual doubling can either enhance narrative drive, or work to counter it, throwing the reader off and leading them to unexpected places. In 'Wood', the final sense of dislocation between Roy and Lea is all the more pronounced for coming at the end of a traditional quest into

and out of the woods: the return home, as in 'Wenlock Edge', feels disrupted and incomplete. In 'Deep Holes' the metaphor of a woman's son falling into a hole engenders a doubling or prefiguring of a later disruption in the narrative of their lives, when this same son vanishes completely and adopts a radically different way of life. Planted so early in the story, the metaphor throughout communicates the mother's impotence and sense of physical loss, maintaining a dynamic whereby linear narrative progression is undermined by a threatening alternative conceptual force. The deep hole conveys the dissonance between the perceptual worlds the mother and son inhabit, while also finding form for the depth of experience of maternal loss.

4.2. Provisional Worlds and 'Liminal Monsters' in *Runaway*

James Geary prefaces *I is an Other* by quoting Wallace Stevens: 'Reality is a cliché from which we escape by metaphor' (unpaginated).²⁴ In *How Fiction Works*, and in the context of discussion of Munro, James Wood makes this related claim: 'The true writer [. . .] must always be acting as if life were a category beyond anything [. . .] yet grasped; as if life itself were always on the verge of becoming conventional' (187). Munro exploits metaphor to draw the layers and themes of her stories together, connecting – though not diminishing – them, in multivalent gatherings of meaning. Whether generating metaphors 'new minted in crises' ('Social Dramas' 141) as Turner puts it, or recasting familiar conceptual metaphors that might, to a lesser writer, prove hazardous for the weight of cliché, Munro employs the figure of speech with intent, giving a pulse to the elusive, the not easily expressed and the hard to categorise.²⁵

It is worth taking a moment to consider such alternative conceptions of metaphor, given their relevance to the discussion at hand. Clarity is important here on those potential uses of metaphor *within* the short story, as opposed to metaphor *as* the short story: the short story form as innately metaphorical. While Turner writes of 'liminal monster[s]' (*Dramas* 31), and Ricoeur considers metaphorical process, Mary Rohrberger has suggested that 'the structure of a story creates metaphors that move to symbolic levels and embody meaning by means of analogies' ('Origins' 11). Peter Brooks' exploration of narrative as metaphor is related. While of course the short story is not simply structure, not only a narrative form, it is one with narrative form at its disposal. Brooks writes:

If Aristotle affirmed that the master of metaphor must have an eye for resemblances, modern treatments of the subject have affirmed equally the importance of difference included within the operation of resemblance, the chief value of the metaphor residing in its “tension.” Narrative operates as metaphor in its affirmation of resemblance, in that it brings into relation different actions, combines them through perceived similarities [. . .], appropriates them to a common plot, which implies the rejection of merely contingent (or unassimilable) incident or action. Plot is the structure of action in closed and legible wholes; it thus must *use* metaphor as the trope of its achieved interrelations, and it must *be* metaphoric insofar as it is totalizing. (*Reading* 91)

If the short story is innately metaphorical, I am suggesting that it is through its capacity to expose and express contradiction, and not through pledging allegiance to Aristotle’s notion of metaphor as ‘resemblance’ as described by Brooks. Where the form as a whole is concerned, the notion of metaphor as unifying, totalising, synthesising, and offering answers is as problematic as any other conception of the short story as unity and totality. Narrative can operate as metaphor within a short story; its metaphorical charge can draw powerfully on resemblance. ‘Life is a journey’, or ‘love is a journey’ (Lakoff and Johnson 44), for instance, are related conceptual metaphors. However, the effect on the short story overall is not bound to be totalising, because the form can draw on other resources to combat such an effect. One might agree with Wells Tower’s visceral notion of herniation: the unassimilable ‘excess meaning’ he describes is arguably an irrepressible sign of tensions arising, at least in part, from the interplay of elements, both narrative and poetic, at work in the short story. One might agree with Michael Trussler that ‘warring hermeneutical strategies’ in the short story serve to place the reader ‘in the hiatus between knowing and not-knowing’ (‘Suspended’ 570, 575). Either way, to acknowledge the form’s capacity for irresolution and complexity is to acknowledge that there might be no ‘dialectical synthesis of [. . .] oppositions’ (571). To acknowledge that the form has the capacity to maintain a pulse – that live flux – is to acknowledge that vying perspectives might be granted ‘equal, although contradictory, authority and status’ (571).²⁶

While I approached ‘Wenlock Edge’ as a tale of unsanctioned initiation, those dynamics identified do not limit themselves to coming of age stories, but are to be found throughout Munro’s body of work. ‘Chance’, the first of a trilogy of stories in *Runaway* that follows a woman, Juliet, from early adulthood to late middle age, is an

interesting example. In this case it is the conceptual metaphor involved – that of life as a journey – which conveys a linear premise: the story, where Juliet is introduced as a young woman, is set in large part on a train. It is telling just how important this central motif of the train journey is in an exploration of the interplay between the predetermined and chance events or change, quickly establishing itself as structurally, metaphorically, and emotionally critical to the story. It will remain so; those more general conceptual associations challenged by associations specific to Juliet, whose life is thrown into ‘detour’ *because* of events on the train (48).

In ‘Chance’, Munro takes a familiar context and concept, and then challenges attendant expectations, most strikingly by drawing upon the transgressive and associative power of blood. Indeed, the words given to one of the characters travelling on the train – a mother admonishing her scribbling child – might alternatively be read as an authorial celebration, a statement of intent: ‘Look at the mess you made, all over the lines’ (62). While Munro has articulated her awareness as a writer of the powerful shifts of perspective associated with thresholds, her work also reiteratively and variously communicates her understanding of the great potential of the threat of ‘breach’. Any implication of structure, she understands, gives her something to work with. Simply put: there could be no messing with the lines, if there were no lines.

In a discussion signalling the transgressive potential of ‘breach’ – and one as relevant to ‘Wenlock Edge’ in this respect as it is to ‘Chance’ – Mary Douglas writes of ‘pollution powers which inhere in the structure of ideas itself and which punish a symbolic breaking of that which should be joined or joining of that which should be separate’ (113). Pollution, she writes, ‘arises from the interplay of form and surrounding formlessness. Pollution dangers strike when form has been attacked’ (104). It ‘is a type of danger which is not likely to occur except where the lines of structure, cosmic or social, are clearly defined’ (113).²⁷

Structurally, Munro establishes an active dialogue between two different journeys, beginning the story with Juliet’s circuitous trip to Whale Bay – off the beaten track, into wilderness, and involving multiple buses and ferries – and then cutting back to six months earlier, and her journey by train to a job in Vancouver. The reader is pitched from the later to the earlier journey twice before the story

settles in Whale Bay, shifting then into a final, far-reaching prolepsis.²⁸ The ‘little detour’ (48) to Whale Bay in fact marks profound change, for Juliet is seeking out the man, Eric, she encountered by chance on the train six months earlier, and with whom she will spend years of her life; much later in the story we learn she has been ‘ransacked [. . .] flooded [. . .] assaulted by happiness’ (85). What is remarkable about Munro’s exploration of emotional transformation here is not only how completely she avoids sentimentality, but how insistently she represents her subject as complex, plural and violent well before Juliet’s experience of falling in love is more directly articulated as both ‘astonishing’ and ‘close to dismay’ (85). ‘Chance’ is an exhilarating meditation not only on the unpredictability of love, but on the insistent disruptions and rearrangements to any of life’s plans. The power and indifference of such disruptions – and with them ‘the potency of disorder’ (Douglas 94) – are explored reiteratively throughout.

Munro challenges any fixed associations of the train journey by introducing it in structural and conceptual dialogue with Juliet’s later ‘off track’ detour: a dialogue which is part of an extensive and tenacious assault on any preconceived notions of linearity and boundedness, predictability and control in life. There is the landscape the train is passing through which is ‘constantly rearranged’ (51), showing a ‘carelessness and contempt for harmony’ (54); there is the child scribbling chaotically over the lines of a drawing book; there is the man who commits suicide on the tracks.

In the short story, any implied narrative trajectory, and however summoned – whether through associations of conceptual metaphor or through the invocation of traditional tripartite structure – is a tool to treasure. Richard Ford is relevant here:

As we read, we can sense the precarious nature of any literary construction, its barely containable excitation of words which mimics our own suffusion in experience, and whose eventual style, like a ballerina’s *line*, is an expression of the manner by which chaos is conditionally and beautifully held at bay. (*Granta* xvii)

In ‘Chance’, it is this sense of the conditional, or provisional, that Munro communicates so well: setting the ‘suffusion’ of experience, and its attendant mess, against the clean lines of the child’s drawing book, the well-defined trajectory of the

train running along tracks, and those clear narrative lines associated with the metaphor of journey, with the attendant expectation of beginning, middle and end.

With the proviso that Ford is here introducing a specific anthology of stories, I would take issue with his concluding claim that stories, at their best, ‘give order to the previously unordered for the purpose of making beauty and clarity anew’ (xxii). Untempered by his earlier statement, it would come dangerously close to an oversimplifying and unifying stance on the form’s capacities. Of course the story can choose to clarify, unify and assert order over chaos, but equally, it can choose to promote awareness in the reader of the provisionality he earlier acknowledged, exposing precarious constructs for what they are. The privileging of such self-reflexive awareness – ‘You! You’re not paying enough attention to your life’ (xvii), Ford writes – is, I would argue, the greater gift of the short story. It is a form that can, on many levels, question the stability of its own construction, even while promoting the tensile strength of that construction. Put another way: by locating the truth of its own constructions in the precarious *and* the tensile, in the mutable *and* the tensile, it is a form in debate with itself. The hybridity it incorporates is indicative of a liminal form.

In his Introduction to the poet François Jacqmin’s *The Book of the Snow*, Clive Scott writes:

Language reaches for reality, but by its very nature can only mediate the real, can only *intervene between* perception and reality and thus seem to drive them further apart. The knowledge, the consciousness of self, that language produces, breaks the spell of simple being. Language cannot penetrate the world’s opacity; it can only expect to compound that opacity through its own ambivalences and approximations. Unfinishedness thus becomes a vital safeguard against any illusions of success, any falling back into lazy complacency. (16-17)

While Ford claims that alongside the promotion of clarity and order, to engage the moral imagination, is to ‘do the best for us that fiction can do’ (*Granta* xxii), Scott’s words are indicative of what is arguably as great a favour to the reader, in language and writing: this privileging of the self-reflexive and the dialogic. Scott’s acknowledgement of unfinishedness as requisite to the reader’s true engagement – forced therefore to ‘find his/ her own way through the process of sense-making’ (17) – is pertinent to my discussion of Munro, whose work, whether she seeks to fire the

moral imagination or not, is more likely to do so by opening dialogue up to the reader, than by presenting him or her with any easy or unifying solution to the chaos she so often identifies.

4.3. Metamorphic Bodies and Worlds

Visceral involvement, as I have suggested, is very often vital to Munro's success. The body's presence as a vessel is as important to her establishment of boundaries as it is to her engagement with the assault and breach of those boundaries.

In 'Chance', Munro's famous 'house' takes shape as a train instead: in this case it is a mobile vessel for the body, and the body a vessel within it, and this presence of the body, as vessel within vessel, pivotal in the portrayal of a character – as so many of hers are – attempting, and yet failing, to keep chaos at bay.²⁹ Having established a fear of 'breach' in her protagonist, through Juliet's attempt to maintain control over personal boundaries on the train (she insists that she would like to read rather than 'chum around' (56) with the awkward stranger who presents himself to her as a companion for her journey), Munro assaults the young woman's lines of defence in an extreme way. Though metaphor has been described as the 'mind's great swerve' (Geary 15), the train does not, in this case, come off the tracks. The metamorphic finds a visceral, transgressive form in Munro's use of blood, which appears – shocking because multivalent – in relation to *both* menstruation and suicide. As a transgressor-connector, and carrying with it a messy suffusion of disgust, curiosity, horror and embarrassment, blood threatens the clean linear progression implied by the rail journey.

'Chance' is of course imbued with a sense of the haphazard from the story's very title, and the promise-threat of chaos is reiterated in the child's play of anarchic colouring-in: the child in question 'slashing a crayon across the pages of a coloring book' (61). The related exchange between parent and child – 'Look at the mess you made, all over the lines' (62) – just as much as the title, foreshadows the moment that Juliet's menstrual blood, remaining unflushed in the toilet, is mistaken by other passengers for the blood of the man who has jumped under the train, the very man whose offer of chumming around Juliet had earlier rejected. The incident, Juliet finds, takes on the power of taboo: it is something she feels she cannot speak of.

She could never tell anybody about the mistake that had been made, the horrid joke of it. People would think her exceptionally cruel and heartless, were she ever to speak of it. And what was at one end of the misunderstanding – the suicide's smashed body – would seem, in the telling, to be hardly more foul and frightful than her own menstrual blood. (64)

This pivotal event is a fluid and shape-shifting connective in the story. The form it takes is dependent on the context in which it is discussed. It is reiteratively and overtly recast: not only by the women spreading word that blood was found in the toilet (63), but by Juliet herself who, only a short while after the suicide, tries to recast it in a casual and amused letter to her parents. The subjective alterations and adaptations involved in such versions serve as proof of 'subtle adjustment[s] not only of the facts but of one's position in the world' (65), exposing human behaviour and interpretation as reliably metamorphic. A single event becomes plural through the predictable unpredictability, or mutability, of the interpretative act. Juliet's own response recasts itself many times over, working through indifference to a sense of the 'obscure and unsettling' (65) to horror and to '[u]nholy laughter' (68), the transgressive nature of the event eliciting a comparably chaotic and visceral response from her. The reader also learns that she will relate this same unholy event in full for the first time, much later in life, to a female friend; it is a sign of the great bond she has with this woman that Juliet feels able to do so. Prior to this, each take on the event – by Juliet and others – is tailored to social and personal context. Munro explores the degree to which the full version of any story may be evaded, should the force of its transgressions and rearrangements be found unacceptable.

It is ironic, and perhaps a little sad, that in spite of Juliet's discovery of love as an equivalent force – plural, contradictory, overwhelming – she finds it impossible to relate the full messy story of the event to the man she loves. This is no fairy tale, of course, and Munro's recounting of the ongoing metamorphoses of this particular narrative is appropriately unsentimental in a story that stresses the subtle relativities, as well as the indifference, at work in the world's rearrangements. It is notable that when, on the train, Juliet might have related the full story of the suicide to Eric, she not only presents an edited account with no mention of blood or menstruation, but also then supplants the story of the suicide entirely with another more palatable narrative about the stars, this one aligning itself more comfortably with traditional notions of romance. Further irony is embedded here, because the story Juliet relates

of Orion's metamorphosis – 'It often happened when somebody really valuable got into bad trouble, they were changed into a constellation' (72) – sits alongside the messier reality of the transformation implied by the suicide on the tracks, and its immediate appropriation and rearrangement into a constellation of competing narrative versions: accounts ranging from the shameless and grotesque, to the heartfelt and to the funny, reconfiguring, in this case, the death of a sad and awkward man.

In Part II of the thesis, I will further explore ways that the confusion of categories and the implications of transgression can challenge complacency and clichéd expectation. Munro's own methods can be extreme. In this instance a young woman who wishes simply to be left alone to read her book, is forced, through the proof of blood, to pay attention to her connectedness to others: her menstrual blood mixed forever in her mind with the blood of the man whose company she had rejected. Munro muddles her forcibly, bodily, with the dead man. This transgressive mix of bloods tells its own tale: one of assault and breach, but one that is also, importantly, humane. While it would be doing 'Chance' a disservice to describe it as a unifying, moral tale, it is a story that provokes the moral imagination – blood working in part as an inclusive and symbolic connector. If Munro is waging an assault on the young woman's belief that she can exist as a discrete human unit, both separate and in control, she is likewise waging an assault on the reader. Such transgressions are hard to process, and the offer extended to the reader is that of being haunted by a sense of visceral – albeit connective – excess, one comparable to that tell-tale scent at work in 'Wenlock Edge'.

I want to finish this discussion of 'Chance' by returning once more to the train to consider a superb touch – if elegant and understated – in Munro's extensive working of this central motif. Coming about halfway in this story rife with upheaval, and following the suicide, Munro depicts the train containing Juliet and a host of passengers as by extension affected by events, itself transformed. Though still running on its tracks, it is anxious now, apprehensive 'about what might lie ahead, around the next curve' (63).

I earlier proposed that as an innately metaphorical form the short story exposes contradiction, challenging the complacency associated with totalising

resemblance and cliché. ‘Chance’ is a complex story. The metaphorical charge it carries draws on the form’s associative capacity to communicate the vulnerability, the irresolution and the complexity of life, and simultaneously the myriad ways humankind tries nonetheless to create order – to combat the transgressive, the polluting, the chaotic, to keep the train upright and running along familiar tracks. The herniation of meaning that Wells Tower describes is both product and sign of ongoing negotiations; were they not ongoing and unfinished, there would be no such hermeneutic excess to linger with the reader, defying assimilation into ‘closed and legible wholes’ (Brooks, *Reading* 91).

4.4. Munro: Proof of Transgression

In ‘Endings, Continued’, Frank Kermode looks back ruefully on his own earlier work in *The Sense of an Ending*, lamenting the difficulty of working as a critic in the post-Derridean world.³⁰ Kermode makes a plea for the right to acknowledge that – still human, ever human – we exist and interact in the world by lending it definition, albeit definition considered fraudulent, or fictive, under the ‘austerity’ of the deconstructive gaze (80):

May we not admit that our acts are slaves to limit? May we not speak of places or realms, and of books and perhaps of lives and of the world at large, as having recognizable though fictive bounds, as affording instances of the kind of error without which a certain species of being cannot live? (80-81)³¹

Kermode asks the question: who can live a deconstructed life? Munro’s answering cry is that few – if anyone – can. But her answer takes shape through fiction that is charged with tense interactions between an informed austerity and something closer to Kermode’s heartfelt plea for definition. She proves that there is much, as a writer, to be gained from acknowledging those fictions deployed to function, human, in the world. She understands that these errors, these commonalities, can be exposed for what they are, while also fully comprehending the power of their insistence: this insistence borne of necessity – a deep seated and shared need to shape the world and make it liveable. It is the resistance to the exposure of these fictions that Munro taps as a source of great agency in her work. The transgressive proof of her characters’ resistance is often a product of the great pressures pushing against ‘fictive bounds’.³²

When Kermode unpacks the word ‘*apophasis*’, taken from Derrida’s lecture ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’, it is to point to an old rhetorical definition by way of the OED: ““a kind of Irony, whereby we deny that we say or do that which we especially say or do”” (73). It is the word *especially* that is striking here, in the context of discussion of denial and resistance in Munro. I have described her stance as a writer as, at times, wry, and that sense of authorial irony can *especially* come through in those moments of exposure, where characters are forced to face the austerity of the truth underlying their particular fiction. Munro makes no concessions, finding as she does, for those moments of especial resistance, unholy, transgressive proofs – haunting, insistent, and bearing the potential to threaten and even to explode her characters’ worlds apart. If unfinishedness in language is a guard against complacency, it is especially in these proofs that Munro, by assaulting the finished, puts the reader, along with her protagonists, on the spot.³³

If, in stories like ‘Chance’ and ‘Wenlock Edge’, Munro exposes the act of world-making for what it is – a fragile art – this exposure is all the more effective for her recognition of just how tangible and self-defining those worlds can seem. This is a complex task, and an important one, because to dismiss those acts of world-making as child’s play would not only be to diminish the powerful dissonances generated by the competing ‘worlds – or world-views’ (Aguirre, Quance and Sutton 10) that she sets in play, but also to undermine the unholy sense of transgression involved when a world is challenged and a boundary breached.

5. The Short Story: A High Stakes Form

Richard Ford has written of his preference for stories ‘in which the goings-on inside seem to matter in the way life and death seem to matter’ (*Granta* xx). In so doing he points not only to the importance of such stakes for the reader, but also to the way those formal dynamics available to the writer of the short story can and should be treated as high stakes tools.

In the final paragraph of Munro’s story ‘Gravel’, which appears in her 2012 collection, *Dear Life*, the narrator recollects the moment before her beloved sister drowned. At this point in the story the reader is already aware both of the nature of

the event and that it is an event long past. The narrator has been told to draw a line under the episode, to move on, and this paragraph comes in response: 'I see what he meant. It really is the right thing to do. But, in my mind, Caro keeps running at the water and throwing herself in, as if in triumph, and I'm still caught, waiting for her to explain to me, waiting for the splash' (109). I draw attention to this moment because Munro leaves the narrator in a state of active suspension, caught up in what is still a live interpretative act. This is one of Munro's great gifts to the reader: allowing irresolution its place, the process of interpretation unfinished. Crucially the reader must be convinced that this matters: the extended act of attention, the reiterative attempts at interpretation. The 'goings-on' that Ford describes must be insistent – textual dynamics that the reader simply cannot get past.

In the stories I will discuss in Part II, both Le and Means set themselves Ford's high stakes challenge. I will firstly, in my exploration of 'Hiroshima', be taking a close look at the way Le engages with an historical event already embedded in the collective consciousness. High stakes indeed.

NOTES: PART I

¹ Philip Langeskov explores the idea of the 'postnarrational' in his 2013 study of David Means (313-318).

² See for instance, *Alice Munro: Paradox and Parallel* (1987) by Walter Rintoul Martin and *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro's Discourse of Absence* (1994) by Ajay Heble.

³ Joanna Luft reads the *New Yorker* version of 'Wenlock Edge' as 'an elaborate intertextual engagement' (103) with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. While comparative engagement with Munro's two versions is beyond the scope of this study, it is also important to note how related points of discussion – notably intertextuality, the play of academic and sensate knowledge, and the narrator's resemblance to the Cornish hen – are influenced by differences in the versions as much as by Luft's focus on *Sir Gawain*.

⁴ According to the *Dictionary of Narratology*, 'foreshadowing' is: 'The technique or device whereby some situation or event is hinted at in advance' (Prince 33).

⁵ For Mary Douglas '[t]he body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious' (115). On the subject of 'body pollution' she writes that not only are 'all margins [. . .] dangerous', but that it is a 'mistake [. . .] to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other margins' (121).

⁶ It is not always useful to know what a writer has said about their own work and their intention with a text; however it would be remiss not to mention Munro's conversation with the *New York Times*. In discussion with Blake Wilson about why the narrator is so troubled by events, she says:

[H]e doesn't harm her. He manages though to get into her inner life which is the reading of the Housman poems, [. . .] to get into her most private places, which is not her body so much, as the poetry. This I think is what throws her. ('Book Review Podcast')

⁷ Munro's 'Child's Play' (TMH) also explores an event with a troublingly embodied legacy: the story is written in the first-person, from the perspective of Charlene, a woman in late-middle age, who recounts events leading to the moment she and a childhood friend committed murder – a murder which has remained a secret throughout their lives. Munro establishes early on that the narrative to be recounted promises a defining moment, but one with aftermath, with residue: this is an event that has defied closure, and that demands revisiting. It is the persistence of Charlene's physical response to Verna, the girl she murders – physical aversion and disgust – that defines this sense of residue or excess; it come through powerfully in repetitions. Through such visceral reiterations, the reader is drawn with Charlene into the experience of aversion and, with it, becomes a close witness to the incremental and startling dehumanisation involved.

⁸ 'Wenlock Edge', the poem from A. E. Housman's collection, *A Shropshire Lad*, is central to the narrator's encounter with Mr Purvis. The poem, referring to an ancient limestone escarpment in Shropshire, is a meditation on time, place, human transience, human connectedness, and repetition.

⁹ Paul Giles allies the development of identity with a journey in which, 'the points of departure and arrival remain equally valid and visible, if not entirely reversible' (33).

¹⁰ Luft herself acknowledges that: 'While a knowledge of *Sir Gawain* illuminates "Wenlock Edge," it does not resolve the story's ambiguities' (122). She makes further attributions reflective of the metamorphic in the story, including Munro's use of landscape and location which she describes as representative of 'unstable boundaries': the narrator inhabiting 'the borders of what she knows' (120).

¹¹ There would be scope for a paper dedicated to the interplay of intertextual references in 'Wenlock Edge'. The reference to *The Scarlet Letter* evokes the badge of shame of the letter 'A' that the heroine, Hester Prynne, wears on her gown. The strong sense of layers and excavation that attend the reference to 'Wenlock Edge', the limestone escarpment in Shropshire where Housman sets his poem, speaks to Munro's body of work as a whole. The reference to Plato's cave speaks to the human concern for what is real – how we locate our version of reality – as much as to Munro's sense of perspective as guided by shifts of position: inside or outside the metaphorical cave (indeed, 'What Is Real?' is the title of one of Munro's most famous essays on her work).

¹² Charles E. May is interesting on form with regard to metaphor as symbolic projection and as aesthetic model-making ('Metaphoric' 63). He suggests that the short story 'is a form which has remained close to the primal narrative that embodies and recapitulates mythic perception, and whose characteristics are compression rather than expansion and concentration rather than distribution' (64). While he aligns himself with totalising approaches to the origins of the form with his suggestion that 'it makes use only of those details which are necessary for the purposes of the story, and its progress seems to be directed towards a single goal' (64), he goes on to discuss the nineteenth century development of fruitful tensions between 'realistic motivation and romantic projection' in what he describes as 'the new short story discourse' (67).

¹³ Paul Giles writes of the 'aberrant quality' of liminality (43) which does not necessarily promise a return to order and reintegration, and questions Turner's understanding of liminality as incorporating the reconciliation of 'transformation and tradition' (33). He claims that 'one of the most powerful impulses of liminality is precisely to [. . .] expose those fractures or lacunae where psychological ambiguities and disjunctions cannot be correlated unproblematically with wider cultural narratives' (33). In fact, not only does Turner project the potential for unresolved 'breach' in his conception of social dramas as process, but in *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors* he ascribes a 'structure-dissolving quality' (263) to liminality.

¹⁴ I consider the breaching of boundaries to be part of the same spectrum of activity as threshold crossings. However, while a threshold conveys to some degree that it invites crossing, the crossing of a boundary – whether tangible or invisible – implies a much greater sense of transgression. A boundary, one might say, is a boundary until you've crossed it. With the crossing of a boundary something closer to a threshold space is established: a space now bearing the potential for threshold flux – for further

crossings and re-crossings. Any boundary therefore might become subject to threshold mutability. In his discussion of transgression and liminality in Thomas Harris's novels, Peter Messent acknowledges the 'undecidable nature of [the] spatial status' of liminality, which might imply boundary crossing or threshold space ('Good Taste?' 80). Belén Piqueras observes that 'liminality is for many authors not a simple issue of demolishing or crossing borders, but an effect of the constant questioning of their necessity; it is the flickering existence of borders, their fluctuating appearance and disappearance, that generates a liminal condition' (10). Paul Giles distinguishes transgression from liminality, suggesting that transgression 'signifies the crossing of a line; but liminality manifests itself as a double-edged phenomenon, involving some form of transition between two points, both of which remain equally visible' (33). I am in agreement with Piqueras that a 'liminal nature [. . .] determines [. . .] potential for transgression' (5).

¹⁵ Claire Drewery explores 'crises of identity encapsulated in moments or interludes of transition' in her study of modernist short fiction, where liminality might be 'fleeting' or temporary (1). The 'transgression and interrogation of borders' (4) that she describes arguably becomes an ongoing state in the short story form, with its capacity to promote 'breach'. In 'Writing through Osmotic Borders' Rosita D'Amara, considering the transgressive dimension of liminality, writes: 'a threshold delimits two other contiguous spaces, on each one of its sides, and implicitly defines them in terms of opposition to each other (outside/ inside, inclusion/ exclusion, mother tongue/ foreign language). At the same time, it is itself a space that enables passage between these two [. . .]. Yet, each passage in either direction inevitably leaves behind traces of often involuntary interactions, also giving thresholds the more engaging dimension of unguarded and utterly contaminated spaces' (102-103).

¹⁶ Mary Douglas writes of Van Gennep that: 'He saw society as a house with rooms and corridors in which passage from one to another is dangerous. Danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others' (96). She continues: 'The danger is controlled by ritual which precisely separates him from his old status, segregates him for a time and then publicly declares his entry to his new status' (96). In Munro, where unsanctioned ritual and body memory are concerned, such separation proves elusive.

¹⁷ A 'telic structure', Aguirre writes, by way of Turner, 'proceeds towards a goal' ('Phasing' 13). Turner associates it with 'a sequence of culturally standardized ends and means', and with a concern for 'restoring solidarity' (*Drums* 80). The SOED defines 'telic' as: 'Directed or tending to a definite end; purposive'.

¹⁸ Turner is here discussing liminality as manifest in 'communitas' – a 'dangerous and anarchical' social state existing in opposition to social structure: a state which is 'of the now' (*Ritual Process* 109, 113).

¹⁹ Leitch is here paraphrasing John Gerlach's description of antithesis, by way of Roland Barthes (*Towards the End* 10).

²⁰ Frank Kermode's discussion of *peripeteia* is interesting with regard to any challenge to the rigid expectation of a particular ending, and the way it is, 'by upsetting the ordinary balance of our naïve expectations, [. . .] finding something out for us, something real' (*Sense of an Ending* 18).

²¹ I am grateful to Dr Philip Langskov for directing me towards Mary Rohrberger, and for his generous and inspiring dialogue on short stories and short story theory in general.

²² Michael Trussler's 'Suspended Narratives: the Short Story and Temporality' is concerned with the relationship between man's temporal placement in the world and the process of sense-making, or hermeneutic understanding. He writes: '[S]hort stories "challenge" knowledge by manifesting a scepticism toward totalization and synthesis' (560). The challenge the form can present to sequential temporal expectation is key here.

²³ I am conscious using the word 'dislocation' of Isla Duncan's own use of the word regarding Munro, not least for the way it relates to conceptions of the reading process as an active form of limbo, a live process: 'Dislocations and disarrangements in her fiction are meticulously and deliberately configured

by a writer whose narrative aesthetic is concerned with patterns and connections that may not be immediately discernible, and may be muffled under layers of narrative or time' (5).

²⁴ The quotation comes from Stevens' *Opus Posthumous* (204).

²⁵ For more on conceptual metaphor see George Lakoff & Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*, which explores the everyday nature of conceptual metaphor, and also the degree to which metaphorical thought shapes our lives:

The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor. (3)

²⁶ In her projection of a dream poetics of the short story Clare Hanson considers 'the particular power of the image-dominated short story form' (29). She draws on Jean Francois Lyotard who 'posits a violent hierarchy in which the poised (not static) image has primacy over narrative, discourse, text' (28). For Lyotard, by way of Freud, the dream represents the 'warring forces of the figural and the discursive', for 'desire, embodied in the image [... exists] in an adversarial relationship to discourse [narrative]' (28).

²⁷ 'A polluting person [Douglas writes] is always in the wrong. He has developed some wrong condition or simply crossed some line which should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashes danger' (113).

²⁸ 'Prolepsis' is defined as: 'An anachrony going forward to the future with respect to the "present" moment; an evocation of one or more events that will occur after the "present" moment (or moment when the chronological recounting of a sequence of events is interrupted to make room for the prolepsis); an anticipation, a flashforward [...]' (Prince 79).

²⁹ Isla Duncan identifies the resistance involved in keeping chaos at bay in 'Child's Play' (TMH), locating evidence of 'withholding' in the gaps, the ellipsis, the fragmentation of the story's opening lines (Duncan 152-3). In spite of the 'cynicism' that Duncan locates in the narrative voice (152), such omissions can be read as an expression of the narrator's inner battle with a potent and disturbing memory, one that dwells deep in her consciousness, her memory, and her body. Such textual resistance loads the narrative with an immediate charge, communicating to the reader, simultaneously, I have something I must tell/ I have something I cannot tell. I would further suggest that the resistance manifest in the unsettling tonal ambivalence of the opening remains live throughout the story. It exists in the unnervingly clinical tone of the narrator as she recounts the horrific act she was involved in; it extends right through to the end of story, where this tonal – and psychological – distance is maintained as she considers what, if anything, she will do to make amends, to seek redemption. The horror of this story resides in part in this cool tonal quality: the revelation of cold-blooded murder protests at such a tone – resists it – charging the text with dissonance. It is a tonal approach that Munro works skilfully into 'Dimensions' (TMH), where a triple murder committed by a father is juxtaposed with tokens of the mundane that seem to resist the fact of the murder by signifying a world in which such things could not possibly happen.

³⁰ Of *The Sense of an Ending* Kermode writes: 'The book was published in 1967, [...] it was in 1967 that Jacques Derrida published the three books which were soon [...] to end one epoch and begin another, in which the sort of literary theory represented by *The Sense of an Ending* might perhaps look at best a little archaic' ('Endings, Continued' 71-72). Derrida's epoch-defining work introduced the world to deconstructive thinking.

³¹ With the phrase, 'the kind of error without which a certain species of being cannot live' Kermode makes reference to an earlier verbatim quotation of Nietzsche's *The Will to Power*.

³² Munro presents another perspective on this dialogue of the fictional with the real through Nita's comment in 'Free Radicals': 'She might have argued [. . .] that it was real life that was the escape. But this was too important to argue about' (TMH 122).

³³ In 'Runaway' (*Runaway*) Munro locates both 'liminal monster' (*Dramas* 31) and transgressive proof through the metaphor of the goat, Flora: Flora becoming, by increments, symbolic, multivalent, representing a threat – catastrophic, unthinkable – to a couple's relationship. She is as much a proof of resistance to the pressure of that threat, as she is symbolic of faultlines in the relationship. The young woman in question would rather remain tangled up in error, in a fiction – in a '[web] of significance' (Geertz 5) that implies living a lie – than face the truth of her situation. The goat comes to represent a lie necessary for the sake of world maintenance, and simultaneously, a hazard lodged deep in her body: this 'murderous needle somewhere in her lungs' is a visceral proof that she can avoid only 'by breathing carefully' (*Runaway* 46).

PART II

**TRANSGRESSION: METAMORPHIC WORLDS IN NAM
LE AND DAVID MEANS**

'I was born tomorrow. Today I live. Yesterday killed me.'

Parviz Owsia

{Source unknown¹}

'Look at the mess you made, all over the lines.'

Alice Munro

{'Chance' *Runaway* 62}

1. Introduction: The Short Story as a Life-and-Death Form.

While Richard Ford prefers stories with high 'life and death' stakes (*Granta* xx), Ali Smith says of the short story form that it *is* a 'life/death form', that '[t]here's a dialogue in there which is about life and death' ('All there is' 81, 67). In this section I am keen to explore the way in which the short story, as a compressed life-and-death form, promotes a 'highly charged field of force' (Brooks, *Reading* xiv).

Peter Brooks, in his study of narrative, writes that '[t]he further we inquire into the problem of ends, the more it seems to compel a further enquiry into its relation to the human end' (*Reading* 95). The compression of the short story, combined with its narrative strategies, arguably gives it, by degree, a more than usually heightened sense of mortality as a form. If in the short story 'man's time-boundedness' can be powerfully manifest in narrative expectation and telic drive (xi), it manifests equally in that heightened liminal or 'phantom space' existing 'in between the initial impulse and the final outcome' (Aguirre, 'Phasing' 20).² This space offers the reader of the short story 'a different kind of journey' (Smith, 'All there is' 68), and can incorporate forceful transgressive dynamics.³

The opening quotation from Parviz Owsia is particularly relevant to my discussion of Le and Means for encapsulating those complex temporal dynamics that the short story can promote. Trussler writes:

The core of the short story becomes the subjective experience of temporality. Knowledge of death, the absence of foreknowledge based on certainty regarding future events, the memory of past occurrences, the projection of possible future events involving both fear and desire form at any given junction in time the subject's experience of temporality. [...] [A]n event's fleeting horizon, by participating in a kaleidoscopic continuum of flux, is uniquely placed in temporality. ('Suspended' 560)

I begin my exploration of the live charge of temporal flux in the short story with an exploration of 'Hiroshima'.

2. Nam Le: 'Hiroshima'⁴

'Hiroshima' announces itself, with the force of that one word, as a story already loaded with meaning. It opens with the dawning of a new day in a temple just outside the city – where Le's child narrator, Mayako, lives with other evacuated children – and accompanies her to the moment the atom bomb falls.

Every young writer at some stage comes upon the advice to 'Write What You Know'. This is not the time to debate the merits and disadvantages of that advice, but the fear that is often expressed about the dangers of writing outside one's immediate experience is relevant here. In Le's choice of subject, and in his belief that he has the right to try to find an aesthetic form and expression appropriate to it, there are risks that go beyond the presumption of using one's imagination.

In 'Writing and the Holocaust', Irving Howe discusses Theodor Adorno's belief that there can and should be no aesthetic response to the Holocaust, highlighting 'the sheer difficulty – the literary risk, the moral peril' of attempting to deal with this subject matter in literature (428).⁵ Any attempt to write of Hiroshima involves perils of a similar nature. Howe considers the dangers of the diminution and even domestication of horrific events through inadequate representation, as well as the uneasy element of spectatorship or voyeurism that might be involved (429). His advice for scholars of the Holocaust holds true for the writer too: 'every once in a while,' Howe suggests, he or she should 'reexamine the nature of his or her responses' (429).⁶ If it is your moral obligation as a writer to ask yourself, carefully and repeatedly, what the nature of your response is, this obligation obviously implies an equally careful interrogation of your aesthetic response.

More recently, asked whether Hitler might be potential subject matter for a film, Michael Haneke responded: 'It's impossible for me, turning this into entertainment' ('Irresponsible'). The filmmaker spoke critically of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, saying that, 'The mere idea of trying to create suspense out of the question of whether the showerhead gas is going to come is unspeakable'. While Haneke is referring to the medium of film, his comments relate in ethical and aesthetic terms to the work Le has chosen to take on. In examining the subject of Hiroshima through the short story form, he is committing himself to an exploration freighted with just the form of narrative expectation that Haneke highlights. How is it

possible to avoid an unconscionable transgression where the subject matter, some would argue, should be considered taboo (Howe 429-430)? How is it possible *not* to commit an aesthetic act of ethical breach when telic expectation is implicit not only in subject matter, but in the form through which that subject is being explored? When the short story promotes, by its very nature, the ‘sense of an ending’, is Le’s whole project not fraught with the very danger Haneke describes?

Haneke’s guidance is perhaps helpful here: Alain Resnais’ film *Night and Fog*, he argues, is ethically responsible because the spectator is asked: ‘What do you think about this? What does this mean to you?’ (‘Irresponsible’). The dialogic element, he suggests, is critical. Asked to defend itself against charges of transgression in this instance – of ethical breach – the short story might claim that as a form in debate with itself as much as with the reader, it asks: ‘What do you think about this? What does this mean to you?’

Having established that Le’s formal choices are bound up in a debate both aesthetic and ethical, and seeking to ask how this debate translates formally in this story, I want to consider the way the writer approaches his subject with what might be described as a strategic avoidance of closure. If dialogue is critical to the story’s ethical defence, then the form’s capacity to draw on threshold dynamics will be important here. I will be exploring the way Le employs temporal flux to open out his subject, while asking how this relates to my understanding of the short story as ‘live’: i.e., sensate, drawing on a threshold charge that is both narrative and poetic, on the dialogue between writer and reader, and incorporating a sense of the unfinished.

Le uses a child’s consciousness to recreate the hours before the atom bomb falls. A first-person, present-tense voice mediates experience: the location of the speaker in relation to the defining event is critical to form. Le takes care to forge a visceral, empathetic link with the character he portrays, channelling the voice of the body so that it becomes an insistent, plural force in a narrative eluding closure, even at story’s end. In his attempt to engage with a moment so horrific that it continues to replay itself in collective historical consciousness, Le keeps his narrator, Mayako, in a corresponding state of limbo. Interweaving time past and future into Mayako’s

present tense narrative, Le creates a charged liminal state in which time is *both* dynamic *and* suspended.

Committing to writing a story that extends beyond a single, pivotal event – while understanding the defining power of that event – Le seeks a physical and temporal dialogue with his reader. He draws on the power of physical empathy as he seeks to recreate, re-visit, and re-inhabit this historical event. In ‘Hiroshima’ the reader is encouraged – more than usually – to dwell with the narrator, and therefore to inhabit the narrative equipped with their sensory perception, their bodily experience of the world. This is how it felt – the reader is being told, over and over. This is what it was like to be me, to be there. In drawing the reader into a close focus, detailed account in which time feels simultaneously muddled and expanded, Le encourages an exaggerated form of visceral empathy which serves to recast the defining event – even though the reader knows it to be inevitable, inexorable. To recast the event in this way is not only to open it up and to approach it afresh with careful attention. It is to ask of the reader both ‘What do you think about this?’ and ‘What do you *feel* about this?’

Opening the story, Le describes Mayako wiping the floor of the temple she has been evacuated to, and seeing her own face reflected in the shiny wood – it is looking back at her ‘like a spirit peering through’ (TB 163). There is in this moment the suggestion of a haunting, of a return to the scene of destruction. It is the first hint of a dialogue between present and future, between life and death. And then, sixteen lines in, Mayako uses the words, ‘I am safe here’ for the first time (163). They are words she goes on to repeat, like an incantation, throughout the story.⁷ From this moment on, it is clear that Le will be drawing in a very deliberate way on the historical consciousness he shares with his reader, and with it the insight they have into the future – an insight that Mayako is denied. By immediately locating his narrator in time in this way, Le is establishing the premise that he will employ throughout: the reader will accompany Mayako through the narrative from beginning to end, while simultaneously looking back at her, from the future.

Le draws the future into Mayako’s present by foreshadowing the defining event. While the overall movement of the story is linear, accompanying the child through the hours immediately prior to the attack, Le evokes the post-atomic world

repeatedly. He refers reiteratively to the sound of 'a single plane' (166, 177), the flash of bright light (174, 176), the heat, the dust, the sickness, the sound of coughing (167, 169), and wheezing, and crying, and the black rain (167, 174, 176). By drawing Mayako's future into her present tense storyline, he is simultaneously drawing the historical past back into the present, in an act both of remembrance and bearing witness. He evades closure, creating a threshold state of past, present and future. The story thus engages anew with the moment of radical change implied by the bomb, and is given plural force: the bomb fell; the bomb falls; the bomb will fall.

In the liminal space that Le creates, past, present and future coexist, creating arresting and often deeply unnerving juxtapositions. Le establishes a palette of references which serve to evoke Mayako's life, her family, and her physical world as a small child, while also foreshadowing the event to come, and the loss of that world. The radio that feeds Mayako slogans of war also 'coughs and wheezes' (167); is described as 'sick again' (175); as making 'the sounds of a sick person breathing' (164). Mayako's sister, who has joined the Young Women's Volunteer Corps, takes part in demolition work to create fire lanes. Mayako watches while, '[e]verywhere things are falling' (168). 'Cover your eyes', her sister says as '[t]he air fills with dust' (168). A man's skin is described as 'the colour of concrete where the dust sticks to his sweat' (168). At the temple, Mayako dreams of her mother, whose hair smells of chrysanthemum and pine oil (174). Later, when her dream turns into a nightmare, her mother smells of dust and sweat, while all around her children are crying (175). Likewise, a memory Mayako has of her father, associated with a ferry trip in the rain, is repeated, embroidered, muddled and incorporated into a stream of impressions located precariously on the threshold between dream and nightmare (165, 167, 174, 176). The scene is associated with a sense of departure or farewell – Mayako's father's face is 'wet from the rain' (165). 'Father looks at me [. . .]. The soft rain runs down his hair and down his face. Everything is the same color in the rain' (167).⁸

Mayako's state of limbo is mediated throughout by her physical experience of the world. The palette of references that Le uses creates a fluid, stream-of-consciousness impression of her life, drawing it close to the senses, and allowing her body to bear witness. Here she is, at night, in the temple:

Do you hear that? It's a plane. [Tomiko says] The wind blows under the door and across the rows and rows of mats and I am back inside the dark Temple. It's your belly, I say to Tomiko. The radio coughs. [...] I lie back and put my hands on my belly and listen to the wind. It sounds like dry grass moving. I breathe in and out – one, two, one, two. (169)

As the story progresses, it is through the increased flux of the images and memories making up Le's palette of references that he is able – simultaneously – to create an impression of accelerated motion towards the inevitable ending, and yet to maintain Mayako's state of perpetual limbo as a child of the past, the present and the future (177). It is especially through moments like this – 'I breathe in and out – one, two, one, two' – that Le continues to tether the reader in this escalating maelstrom. The very fact of physical empathy is, he confirms, one of a writer's most powerful tools.

There are some complex dynamics at work as Le seeks to avoid closure. For instance, the repetition of 'I am safe here' (163) serves both as foreshadowing and as 'closural signal', in this case projecting for the reader an ending embedded in the historical past. The term 'closural signal' can be used 'to identify a textual element that anticipates or *promises* one form of closure or another (i.e., a narrative motif that *signals* closural potential)' (Winther, 'Closure' 64).⁹ This is particularly interesting in 'Hiroshima' in relation to the revisiting and recasting of a single event, for while the story throughout bears the inevitable sense of one anticipated ending, Le makes the choice to pre-empt that ending – reiteratively – in a plurality of 'closural signals'. This means that the reader is confronted with the ending many times over before the story reaches its actual end.

Winther's suggestion that 'narrative closure' in a short story does not automatically imply 'hermeneutic closure' (66) is relevant here. He writes:

[The] story line may have been brought to a logical end point, but the type of ending provided may either point beyond the text itself to further developments and/ or force the reader back into the text to ponder the meaning inherent in the particular forms of closure at hand. (63)

If, in such cases, the end ‘does not in any way resolve, or close, the emotional and ideational ramifications’ involved (63), there is a strong case for careful examination of the work of ‘narrative closure’ and ‘hermeneutic closure’ in ‘Hiroshima’. Here, where forms of resolution are contentious, and the dialogic element is a line of ethical defence, the process Winther describes, in which the reader is *forced* back into the text, is important. Le’s story must reach an end – as every story must – but it is important that in hermeneutic terms it remains live for the reader.¹⁰

Le, by working multiple ‘closural signals’ into the story, arguably forces a form of pre-emptive narrative closure on to the reader many times over. This reiterative action engages directly with the strong sense of telic expectation associated with the known ending. There is a productive transgression involved in forcing the reader to confront that ending repeatedly, for not only are they not in control of the progression of the narrative in the way they might expect, but they are confronted with a multitude of arresting details. The suspense associated with foreknowledge of the historical event – the use of which, Haneke argues, may be unconscionable in a work of art – is intercepted and interrupted. There is no straightforward narrative trajectory: the reader is involved in a journey of another kind. When the story ends, this repetitive action that Le has established remains insistent as a presence. In a seeming contradiction, it is through direct engagement with narrative or closural expectation that Le is able to redirect some of its energy – and with it, the reader – away from prurient suspense. In so doing he is employing, to great effect, dynamics described in the introduction to this section. The telic force of ‘man’s time-boundedness’ (Brooks, *Reading* xi) reveals an agency which can be harnessed and redirected to make of the short story a heightened and meaningful liminal space. In this threshold space time is metamorphic. The reader is forcibly disorientated, and this disorientation opens up a new form of dialogue between the reader and the event. The reader’s visceral proximity to Mayako becomes ever more critical as they negotiate the challenges of this narrative and hermeneutic space: it is as companion to the child that they must try to make sense of the story process. In the case of ‘Hiroshima’ this is a threshold space primed with empathy. A heightened awareness of mortality is encouraged in the reader through the story’s compressed temporal flux, while the multitude of personal and visceral details offered create an

empathetic bond. Physically and empathetically engaged in this way, it becomes much harder to read only as a spectator governed by suspense.

Another way of viewing the dynamic of pre-emptive interception and interruption at work in 'Hiroshima' is as *resistance* to the end. Austin M. Wright, in his study 'Recalcitrance in the Short Story', suggests that 'formal recalcitrance is [. . .] the resistance offered by the materials to [. . .] form as it tries to shape them' (116). Such 'recalcitrance' is in evidence in 'Hiroshima' in the story's resistance to one dominant narrative trajectory feeding off suspense. If recalcitrance 'engages us in a struggle between the vision of a potential and eventual unity and the obstructions to that vision' (117), those obstructions – those interruptions – Le must be aware, are critically important as he works to counter the insistent force of narrative drive. Failure to do so might not only imply, in purely formal terms, 'triviality, boredom, banality' (116) for his reader, but also an ethically questionable mode of engagement with his subject. 'Recalcitrance', however, implies a story process involving reiterative acts of attention from both writer and reader (120). Such acts of attention are encouraged, in 'Hiroshima', as much through vivid, sensory details of life as through the darker intimations of foreshadowing and 'closural signals'. The multitude of details that Le employs oscillate between representation of life and the destruction of that life: on the one hand, 'rubble' and dust and 'dead building[s]' (170), and on the other 'the sound of water running', 'moss', and green leaves (171); on the one hand the sounds of the cicadas Mayako chases outside her family home before evacuation, and on the other the sounds of the planes she learns to identify with her father (169).

Acknowledging the dialogic process offered by the short story form, Trussler writes that 'the form often requires a reader who is willing both to interpret a text and to suspend interpretation, to wait' ('Suspended' 575). He relates the play of narrative insistence and resistance to the role of temporality in the short form. For Trussler short stories have the capacity to communicate 'that transforming events into a [temporal] continuum has the potential for reducing the "meaning" of an event' (560). In the case of 'Hiroshima', Le's use of temporal flux puts the reader on the spot not only by challenging what Trussler describes as the 'fundamental

[experience]' of 'the chronological progression of time' (560), but by associated resistance to the diminution of the event it seeks to represent. In this case, the play of temporal flux works to counter reductionism.

Both Wright and Trussler speak to Aguirre's notion of a liminal or 'phantom space' where 'the expected, conventional flow of action' is suspended 'in a betwixt-and-between state', with such suspension restoring the 'original value and intensity' of the subject ('Phasing' 20).¹¹ The work 'phasing' does to create a multiplication of thresholds, or expansion of threshold experience, is important here.

'Phasing' implies the 'factoring of action into several versions of itself': in a fairytale 'a kiss becomes three kisses, a gift becomes three gifts' (20). However, because '[t]he three items in the series are essentially one', that action or item is thus suspended and made '*visible* as process' (20). In 'Hiroshima' if the dropping of the bomb – and its implied aftermath – is to be understood as the action or event, it is through that event's multiple iterations that it becomes suspended and visible as process. If the 'phasing of space, time and action is [. . .] essentially a threshold-creating and threshold-crossing operation' (21), the narrative space that Le creates, by interweaving details of past, present and future, involves the reiterative re-creation and re-crossing of temporal thresholds.¹² The history of the bomb is rendered live as process, for in this 'phantom space' where time is both dynamic and suspended, the event *will* happen, the event *has* happened, and the event *is* happening. In this way Le might be seen to be combining the effects of Winther's 'closural signal' and 'closural marker' ('Closure' 64), working to interrupt any final act of closure implied by such a 'marker' by folding time back on itself.

While 'Hiroshima' is neither fairytale nor rite-of-passage story, Le can be seen to create a version of the phasal structure that Aguirre describes, where '[a] whole (an action or an object) can be broken up into 'parts'; or it can be expanded into several versions of itself' (21). Aguirre writes: 'each 'part-action' loses autonomy, it ceases to be its own end and becomes a means to a further end – a stepping-stone – a threshold' (21). If one considers the whole action as the event of the atomic bomb, and those 'part-actions' as multiple versions of the bomb – fragments of the bomb – it becomes clear that, with all working as 'stepping-stones' or thresholds to a further end, Le is able to create an expansive, suspended and

ongoing version of the event. While Aguirre describes this 'phantom space' as existing 'in between the initial impulse and the final outcome' (20), with the assumption – at least in fairytales – that that outcome or ending will be reached, Le works hard to ensure that the ending is live with the irresolution and fragmentation of those 'part-actions'. While the ending might seem 'predictable [. . .] inevitable' even 'predetermined' (21), the insistent work of 'phasing' works with temporal flux to ensure that the reader is left feeling suspended in a 'phantom space'.¹³

While the fragmentation and escalation involved in this textual process arguably reflect the fission and escalation of the atom bomb itself, it is important to note that the escalation of the story, and the textual energy produced, are only *partly* dictated by such 'part-actions' anticipating the story's ending. As I have already pointed out, textual details pay tribute to life as well as foreshadowing the loss of that life. That the details Le employs might evoke past, present or future heightens the overall effect and makes it more complex. The following instance is just one example: 'The rain comes down without noise. Over the wind the all-clear sounds. Someone in the Temple is softly crying. Then far away another B-29' (176). Le evokes the future in the intimation of black rain; the past in the suggestion of safety; a present-tense grief in the sound of crying; and finally the future with another plane on the horizon: and this is barely two sentences of the story, which gives some idea of the degree to which Le crafts this threshold effect.

I have made the point that Le summons familiar associations throughout the narrative: the sound of a single plane; the flash of bright light; the noise of coughing; the black rain. Revisiting such associations, however, he further works to 'defamiliarize' them, so they are reactivated, creating a charged code of reference through the story, and specific to the story.¹⁴ In so doing he invokes the bombing and its after-effects repeatedly, communicating a quality of plurality, of the perpetual-eternal, while also rendering his account deeply personal.

A particularly vivid and effective example is the way Le incorporates Mayako's memory of the moment a family photo was taken into the narrative: 'We made a photograph to send to Big Brother too. Look here. Don't blink now. The man's rabbit teeth above the box, the sky behind him dark' (166). Le introduces the

scene early in the story, and then embroiders it in multiple versions, building it through repetition, lending it more power by increments (166, 171, 174, 177).

Look here, says the man with the rabbit teeth. [...] We look into the box. [...] Don't blink now. But everything turns white – the box disappears – and I blink. [...] It's only the magnesium flash, says Father. He laughs at me and says, Don't worry. The air feels like it wants to rain. (174)

Mayako's father's reassurance that 'It's only the magnesium flash', operates in the same way that repetitions of 'I am safe here' and 'We are safe here' do (169), forcing the reader to engage with the story on more than one level. They are kept in an uncomfortable double-bind of close association with Mayako's world while never escaping their awareness of historical fact. Le carries this double play through to end the story, returning to the memory of the family photo. While Mayako's fate is unspecified, the significance of the moment is clear:

On my left is Mother and on my right is Father. Behind me is Big Sister. The paper is mostly gray. Then everything turns white and the left side of my face is warm. Don't blink, says the man with the rabbit teeth. Don't worry, says Father. He laughs at me. Don't blink. Look here. (177)

Le creates of the ending a live moment in which future – and therefore past – meet in the present, proving the form paradoxically adept at channelling *and* disrupting those energies and impulses associated with traditional narrative progression.

While it is beyond the parameters of this study to offer a comprehensive discussion of debates around historical authenticity (or historicity), it is important to acknowledge their relevance. Michael Trussler, suggesting that '[h]uman awareness [. . .] is largely devoted to synthesis', sets out the need for historical representation to give the past scope to exist as 'an unresolved hermeneutic situation' ('Suspended' 560, 564). The short story, he argues, is well placed to challenge reductionism and the ordering impulse: 'forgoing sequentiality' (560) and foregrounding the 'integrity of the singular event, the autonomy of the moment' (561).¹⁵

Trussler could be describing 'Hiroshima' when he writes of a story 'quietly [treating an event] as an implosive breach in the everyday flow of time, a dislocation

that threatens to collapse those narratives that seek to contain it' (566).¹⁶ Le not only challenges sequentiality and promotes temporal breach, with its implication of transgression, but he locates this historical trauma in the mundane world, harnessing the reader's sense of recognition to bring them, by increments, closer to an event that might otherwise seem distant.¹⁷ Not only does this approach draw the reader's body into the story as a conduit for understanding, but it also ensures that the narrative of Hiroshima is rendered in such a way as to make it seem quite possible that it could happen again. Its insistent message is: this did happen, this could happen again, this is how it happened, see it happening, feel it happening, watch it happening now.¹⁸

That the reader's experience of 'Hiroshima' should be one of empathetic extension and connection rather than one of spectatorship or voyeurism is ethically important. That the reader – approaching the story as a body 'time-bound' in the world – engages with a dialogue about life and death using both body and mind, is critically important. That the story leaves the reader with a troubling sense of surplus – that 'excess meaning' that '[w]e don't know exactly what to do with' (Tower, 'Lit Show') – is arguably not only important, but a moral imperative for the writer taking on the subject. This is not a reading experience that should be allowed to settle: the story's unfinishedness is part of its ethical defence. The reading experience, one might say, *should* be transgressive, *should* implicate the reader: for their part in this unfinished dialogue is their own defence against spectatorship. In this case dialogic insistence and threshold flux bear a live ethical charge.

The story reaches an ending, the reader closes the book, but there is no closure. The liminal state seems to overspill the bounds of the narrative. It is a mark not only of the sophistication of the writing, but a reminder of the agency of the short form.

3. David Means: 'Railroad Incident, August 1995',¹⁹

I have suggested that the short story's inbuilt sense of mortality lends it an innate power: the awareness that it will end, and soon, heightens the form. If the pressure of the ending, if anticipation of the ending is part of reader expectation for the short story, then the heightened dynamics and high stakes involved represent a profound

bond between writer and reader, who approach the form with the shared experience of being bodies 'time-bound' in the world.

In my discussion of Munro, I explored the way the form distinguishes itself through viscerally charged 'negotiations with reality' (Brooks, *Reading* xi), while in my exploration of Le, I considered the role of temporal play in a story seeking to awaken the historical past and to render it live. Means' 'Railroad Incident, August 1995' reads as a fiercely energetic dialogue, or negotiation, with what Ricoeur describes as 'the nontransferable experience of having to die' ('Narrative Time' 178). In seeking to explore 'the *weight of the death*' (16) of a man, and, with it, the meaning or weight of a life, Means showcases the short story's formal capacities. A narrative that might be told summarily – as the title implies – is animated especially by threshold strategies that promote a tense dialogue between writer and reader, between reader and 'incident', and between expressions of life and the imminence of death. That such insistent dialogue incorporates transgressive dynamics makes it all the more affecting; its exploitation of the hopes and fears of the reader renders this story speculative – in a way that 'Hiroshima' is not – about where it is going and how it might end. Means creates a charged narrative space, one that Philip Langeskov argues 'exemplifies the temporal problematics of the form itself: the dissociation from context, the refusal of easy interpretation, of linearity and the destabilisation of our way of knowing' (288).

When the nameless protagonist – Means only ever offers his initials: 'HH' (9) – stumbles across the group of shiftless youths who will kill him, Means describes the encounter in the following way:

Slowly and with grace the two boys to the side came to him and gently helped him up, feeling his lack of resistance immediately, making note of it by bending back his arms behind him far enough to produce a rainbow of pain over his shoulder blades. Their job was to fill the beating with as much dignity as possible, to uphold the ballet of the scene, to make it worth their fucking while – to produce a stasis upon which their friend, with his long swatches of clotty black hair swaying now before his bowed head, might work [. . .] (8)

I draw attention to this moment because it can be read as a writer's statement of intent. The pairing of 'stasis' with 'work' here is particularly significant for its suggestion of the stasis Means himself operates within. In the story space he creates,

the man's fate is suspended: he inhabits a liminal space between life and death. And yet negotiations fuelled by the likelihood of his death are ongoing until the final paragraph. Throughout the story Means' interventions reorient the reader with new information. Early on, when HH has cut his foot open on broken glass, the very fact that he hopes 'the tetanus might drain out' (4), simply for invoking a future, offers hope. Even such a small textual detail takes its place within the dialogue of possibilities at work in this story, which looks on the one hand towards life, and on the other towards death.

It is only in the final paragraph that Means reveals the man's death as fact, locating the precise moment of death:

By the time the train got there he was gone, either a skull vacant of chemical and electrical activity, simple as that, or a soul rising up through limestone and shale into the twilight sky: he was dead. When he died, shortly after that final kick [. . .] (15)

Such finality is unusual in this story, which builds an overtly provisional and speculative narrative around HH, encouraging the reader's sense of involvement in the man's fate and the meaning attached to it – the weight of a life. Means creates a threshold space to debate the weight and weightlessness, the meaning and meaninglessness of this man's life. The phrase 'perhaps, or perhaps not' (11) is more typical than conclusiveness in the story: Means is here speculating over just one of many scenarios he has offered for his protagonist.²⁰ In fact the passage above, confirming his death, while unusual for the finality it offers, is also very much representative of the narrative overall for the hermeneutic irresolution it conveys. HH, the reader is told, is now '*either* a skull vacant of chemical and electrical activity [. . .] *or* a soul rising up' [my italics]; and so even the certainty of death is rendered uncertain, unfixed.

As an authorial or narratorial presence Means proves himself a shape-shifter to a dizzying degree. Whether viewed as an 'overt' or an 'intrusive' narrator, he promotes a narrative that displays signs of his presence, his intervention, and authority throughout.²¹ And while Means establishes his omniscience as a narrator, he also leases the narrative out to others by employing multiple and variable points of view from those either participant in or associated with HH's fate: for instance, the

collective perspective of the youths who kill him (5-7; 8-9); the perspective of the train driver who runs over his body (15-18); the perspective of the Reverend Simpson who, in one of Means' speculative digressions, appears to scoop HH to safety and salvation (12-13).²² With HH and his fate thus focalized in multiple and variable ways, Means puts a form of hermeneutical parcelling out into effect. The *meaning* of what unfolds here is up for grabs; it is indeterminate. Locate it where you will and if you can.

Means effectively works a 'double logic' (Prince 23) into his narrative, ensuring an ongoing dialogue between the incident being related and the meaning of that incident as related and debated by the author and narrator in digressions and speculations (10, 15), and through those multiple and variable points of view. Drawing attention in this way to the metamorphic power of the narrative act, Means pays energetic tribute to the uncertainties of human concerns by promoting – and himself inhabiting – a shifting, uncertain narrative space where meaning is either unreliable or hard to decipher. In establishing this live space and in asking his reader to join him there, he makes them fully participant. Not only are they constantly forced to assess and reassess where the story is going, but they are challenged to recognise and respond to their own reactions and shifting perceptions throughout.²³

That the body of the man animates these threshold negotiations is important. Not only does it make an appeal to the 'time-bound', flesh-and-blood reader through a protracted and agonizing metamorphosis from a 'dainty man in a white dress shirt' (1), to a dead body stripped of identification (15), to only 'a torso barely resembling a human figure' (17). It is also ever-present in the interplay of insistence and resistance regarding HH's fate, in the many interruptions of the story's drive towards death. The process set in motion from the first is that of the simultaneous evocation and dismantling of a life. As the story progresses to the moment of death, the man sheds symbols of his life and identity – his shoes, his shirt, his wallet. All the while Means evokes his past, present and (in this case speculative) future through what are often viscerally charged details: the memory of his wife's shoulders beneath him as they made love for the first time (10); 'the shock and pain and the roar of blood to the eardrums' as he lies beaten and near death in the rail tunnel (13); the way he '[falls] to his knees with his dirty palms out and crying' before the 'kind old man [. . .] the Reverend Simpson' who comes to his aid (12).

Means creates a liminal realm of simultaneity and provisionality. The first intimation of such active dynamics comes with the reader's introduction to a man who, resting on a long walk, is 'dainty [. . .] in a white dress shirt' (1), yet also – as the title intimates – an incident waiting to happen. The journalistic title has a distancing effect, and is at odds with the careful and physically charged description of the man Means subsequently offers.²⁴ This is a negotiation of narrative distance that will remain live in oscillations throughout the story. There is furthermore a tonal dissonance achieved in the opening through the doubling of discourse; the narrative is introduced to the reader through the distancing title, yet followed swiftly by the close, third-person narration of the first few lines.²⁵ This is a good indication that Means will be exploring the space between indifference and empathy, dissociation and association, as he relates the demise of this man.

As the story progresses, Means proves himself an audacious writer, exploiting the dissonance generated by bold interventions and digressions. One of the most notable comes at the moment HH is killed by a final kick to the chin, when Means segues seamlessly from a viscerally charged close, third-person narration of the man's last moments to the intrusive impersonal details of the Doc Marten that does the job. The reader learns that the boot had 'steel-reinforced soles of some kind of rubber that was OIL FAT ACID PETROL ALKALI RESISTANT and stood up to the toughest abrasions and work conditions' (13) just before it breaks fragile human bones. Means is as unafraid of such shifts of tone and of discourse as he is of overt contradiction and speculation, and all are encouraged by the use of multiple points of view as the narrative unfolds. Operating within such a compressed story space, the effect of these narrative changes is pronounced.

Wright uses the term 'modal discontinuity' to describe the use of 'contradiction in [. . .] fictional mode' (127). Such sudden changes – for example from 'comic expectations to serious violence', or from 'religious [to] realistic explanations' – represent disruption and therefore imply resistance in a piece of fiction (127). With such shifts announcing that 'the story has moved into a new fictional world', Wright suggests therefore that 'the reader must find a new kind of formal principle to accommodate the change' (127). Certainly one of the striking qualities of 'Railroad Incident, August 1995' is that Means does ceaselessly toy with the facts, tone, discourse and mode of the fiction he is recounting. This implies that at

times he constructs worlds of meaning only to undermine or destroy them. Reverend Simpson is a good example of this: representing a form of salvation, and yet himself revealed to be a speculative fiction. Equally striking however is that the reader's learned anticipation of this interplay of creation and negation does not detract from the tension of inhabiting the story space.²⁶ It not only adds to the reader's sense of involvement, investment and suspense, but adds the charge of hermeneutic ambiguity too. In the case of the Reverend Simpson, this means that not only does the man himself linger as an absent-presence as the story proceeds to its ending, but the oscillations of the hermeneutic debate he represents – 'if there is a God [. . .] if there is no God' (10) – linger too. In Means' fictional world, a charged simultaneity results: 'whatever has been left behind is carried along . . . [and] remains a potential presence' (Iser, *Prospecting* 277).

As well as disrupting the reading experience through the charge of resistance, Means works transgression into the text in the ongoing interplay between absence-presence and creation-negation: boundaries are perpetually challenged, beliefs are recast and 'truths' undermined or exposed as frauds. The worlds of meaning Means represents are not sacred: they are not contained and not protected. As well as dissonance and resistance, there is a cumulative and powerful sense of 'breach' at work in this threshold reading experience. It is one that speaks both to human frailty and vulnerability; to body and mind.²⁷

That Means seeks to call attention to the very act of tale construction as it is underway is confirmed early on by further tell-tale shifts in the tone of the narrative. The reader, introduced to the man through a close third-person perspective as he sits 'tasting his own salt on his lips' is then told, 'he was *the kind of man* who had his jeans dry-cleaned' [my italics] (1). If the physical experience of salt on lips works to forge a close allegiance between man and reader, it is one that is quickly if subtly adjusted by the distancing effect of those intrusive words: 'he was the kind of man'. And if this adjustment is subtle, subsequent repetitions of the phrase create a more pronounced effect, substantiating the presence of that overt or intrusive narrator so keen to draw attention to the narrative act. 'He was *the kind of man* who would leave his car running for the sake of appearances' the reader is told; '(He was *the kind of*

man who untied his shoes first [. . .]; he was also *the kind of man* who used an ivory shoehorn to get them on in the morning' [my italics] (2). The effect of these repetitions is distancing for exposing the man as a construct, even while the reader is encouraged, in his company, to recollect the taste of salt on their lips. The man – the reader is reminded – both does and doesn't exist; this is a life with weight and substance and yet this is no life at all.

There are complex, vying dynamics at work. Means not only draws on visceral connectives, but he accompanies each of the repetitions that draw attention to the narrative act with detail evoking both a social class and a life. The reader learns, for instance, that the man's jeans are dry-cleaned (1) and that he loves 'the feel of his sock sliding firmly against [the] cool smoothness' of the shoehorn (2). If the repetition of 'he was the kind of man' (1, 2) is distancing both for flagging the constructedness of HH and for carrying forward something of the cool tone of the title, if its work is in part to suggest an impersonal inventory of one man's life, it is also through this briefest of inventories that Means breathes life into the man.

The story's opening moments can be seen as a model in little for the whole, and serve to establish the uneasy dialogue that Means will maintain with his reader in this short story space. In only two pages he introduces his story with a cool journalistic title, locates his protagonist physically, offers a visceral connection to the reader, and repeatedly promotes narrative distance by drawing attention to the constructedness of both man and narrative act, while simultaneously offering details so specific as to draw the man's world into close focus. Means then draws the reader's attention to the man's shoes, which he removes, and to his feet, which offer another physical connective in the memory of sock against cool shoehorn. It is only now – with the man's shoes, that 'lonely pair of fine, handmade Italians' left behind, 'one nestled against the other lovingly' (3) – that Means cuts open the man's foot as he steps on a jagged piece of broken glass. The reader is told that it 'went into his heel cleanly, cutting firmly into the hard pad, opening a wound that sent him falling sideways' (3), before Means goes on to describe in great detail the nature and level of pain the man suffers. The moment is both convincing and viscerally affecting.²⁸

Such a seemingly contradictory dynamic, serving simultaneously to diminish and to honour life, is used again later. In the following shift of perspective from HH's

bodily trial to equivalent trials on a vast scale, the reader is offered a double point of view:

He would re-enter the so-called world in a half hunch, with his knees bleeding [. . .]. In his pain certain natural opiates would have kicked in, chemicals that sustain the body in times of great trial and allow forced marches of one sort or another – great mass gatherings of the uprooted shuffling up dust that can be seen from jets passing, the ill-fated regions of Rwanda or wherever [. . .]. (11)

There is a form of ‘double focalization’ at work as the reader is both with the man who is ‘barely standing and barely crawling’ (11-12), and also in the jet passing overhead at such a distance that all they witness of mass horror is the disturbance of dust from the earth.²⁹ Means makes the move, as before, from a viscerally induced sense of proximity to a distancing approach to human fate. In this case, the use of the words ‘or wherever’ exaggerates the effect; this offhand attitude to human life gives a jolt to the reader and effectively asks of them, Well, do you care? How much? It draws attention to the way this railroad incident, just as incidents in ‘Rwanda or wherever’ might be barely acknowledged – marginalia in our lives. It also draws attention to the powerful effect of bringing the reader’s own body to bear witness. If observing mass trauma at a safe distance maintains a boundary, separating the experience of others from oneself, then to accompany HH so closely in his state of suffering breaches that boundary. By associating this man’s suffering with ‘Rwanda or wherever’ Means establishes a connection that thereafter places his reader in a threshold space between the two. The sense of ‘breach’ involved is transgressive and troubling for the reader: intentionally so. It comes laced with the feeling of unease that Means promotes throughout – if the story offers a dialogue it is an uncomfortable, exacting one.

While Means’ adjustments to his tale-under-construction are calibrated with some subtlety in the story’s opening, his overall modifications and interventions shuttle between the subtle and the conspicuous. Means interrupts his narrative with temporal shifts, with contradictory scenarios, with speculative riffs, and with digressions – some offer deeply personal details, some are chilly and factual. The reader is offered multiple points of view sometimes within a single paragraph (13-15). Given the effective juxtaposition of alternate perspectives, versions and outcomes, the disruption and disorientation implied for the reader is acute. This

speculatively charged narrative not only demands an active, responsive reader, but also establishes a transgressive premise early on: no boundary is sacred. Any fictional act of world creation can just as quickly become an act of world destruction. In roaming this provisional narrative space, Means peacocks his ability to insistently and variously challenge the reader's sense of boundaries.

Insistent repetitions cumulatively promote uncertainty and changeability. The reader, offered '[a]n explanation' (4) for the man's walk along the railroad, is then offered *several* potential explanations, and yet each is prefaced with either the word 'perhaps' (4, 5) or '[m]aybe' (5). With a shift of point of view to that of the young men who will attack him, the description of '[w]hat they saw', first offered with certainty, specificity, is quickly countered by 'maybe all of that wasn't noticed' and then 'or maybe they didn't notice at all' (7). With each shift the reader is asked to recalibrate their response – there is no scope to settle.

A striking example of the provisionality at work comes in the section of prolepsis which follows HH's beating and precedes his death. The interruption offered is a marked narratorial intervention, with Means shifting from the dominant past tense narrative to a future conditional projection, one which communicates itself with all the certainty of the future tense: 'He would re-enter the [. . .] world in a half hunch, with his knees bleeding and the sky overhead showing the first hints of morning' (11). It is only through repetition of the conditional later in the paragraph – 'there would only be' (11) – that the speculative uncertainty of this scenario really dawns: each repetition undermines its probability. The effect is particularly pronounced in the third repetition with the use of the conditional perfect – 'would have' – for the way it underlines the fragility of the whole construct. Somehow, what had seemed feasible only a few lines before has been subtly transformed into the impossible. What had been offered has been retracted. In a brutal shift for the reader to make when a man's life is at stake, it becomes clear that *if* this had been the case, *if* HH had re-entered the world, this is what *would* have happened. Means seeks to place the reader 'betwixt and between' (*Ritual Process* 95) hope and fear.

What is all the more remarkable is that having negated his hopeful scenario, Means continues to work to keep the fiction he has undermined alive. The reader is now fully aware that they are in the realm of improbability, and yet before

confirming that HH is indeed dead, Means continues to elaborate the scene both in present tense ('he works his way'), and future tense ('a kind old man [. . .] will pull over') (12). What follows is a speculation on a fiction: again the word 'perhaps' is used three times in quick succession as Means considers what *might* have motivated the fictional 'Reverend Simpson' to come to the aid of HH. What is compelling about this section is the overt way it engages with those 'deliberate frauds' (TMH 294) that Munro writes of. That such a speculative mode of narration can remain insistent and engaging – even once exposed as a fraud by the author himself – confirms just how fundamental such fictions are in the human concern for a life to mean something, and not simply to be cast aside as so much waste.

In 'Railroad Incident', as in 'Chance', the metaphor of 'life as a journey' communicates itself through the linearity of the railroad tracks that HH follows to his death. While he is gradually broken down as a physical presence in the world, the physiological process finds extension in psychological and emotional detail. If this is a metamorphosis from life to death it is protracted, bearing a charge of provisionality that is communicated through the metamorphic uncertainties of such details.

The reader's relationship with the story's ending is informed by threshold flux. The insistence of life in all forms – including speculative fictions – vies with the insistent 'weight of [. . .] death' (17). In the final few lines, the train driver who bears the burden of HH's death, assuming he was still alive when the train passed over, nonetheless '[feels] the weight lift' and is able to notice 'the smell of the water, earth, sky', the '[e]vening [. . .] falling sweetly between the trees' (17). Means, as Le, calls upon the body as witness to life, detailing the way it locates itself, sensate, in the world. For HH, there is 'the thump of his car door, rubber against rubber, sounding particularly sweet echoing in [the] confines' of the Lincoln Center parking lot (10), and 'the taste of [his wife's] red hair in his mouth when they last hugged' before her death (4). For Mayako, there is the garden of the Shinto Shrine where her father works in Hiroshima, with its abundance of life in 'maples and pines and cherry trees and small green hills and stone basins with running water', in 'yellow peonies and irises with flowers like purple tissue paper and lotuses with leaves like cups', in the 'rocks with more than fifty types of moss' (173).

Ali Smith writes: ‘The story goes beyond itself if it’s well enough made. It’s not just that it’s an intimation or an assertion of mortality, it’s also an assertion back at mortality. If this is all we’ve got, then this is what we can do with it’ (‘All there is’ 66). She speaks to the way both Means and Le give a charged representation to life as a threshold state, not only through the accumulative power of textual details evoking a compressed life-death dialogue, but through active engagement with temporal dynamics and the short story’s threshold textual strategies.

It is important to reiterate that neither Le nor Means offer the reader an easy ending. Insistent expressions of life remain in dialogue to the end with equally insistent expressions of loss. Both pay tribute in this way to the scope of the bond between writer and reader as bodies ‘time-bound’ in the world, and as minds bound to acts of world-construction. That the short story has the capacity to introduce transgressive dynamics into this dialogic bond only increases its powerful potential as a form – to provoke the reader out of complacency and to remind them to pay careful attention.

NOTES: PART II

¹ The quotation is of unknown source but attributed to the Iranian writer Parviz Owsia, and is inscribed on a bench on Hampstead Heath in North London.

² David Constantine’s evocation of the short story through the metaphor of the weir is pertinent to discussion of the life-death tensions and transgressions the short story can convey, incorporating muddled simultaneity and shape-shifting as much as a convincingly channelled inevitability. Constantine uses the weir to explore the short story’s capacity for cross-currents, slant movements, and resistance, as well as for moments of suspension and simultaneity. Relating it to the musical technique of *ritardando*, Constantine has said, ‘You know where it’s going, but it’s held back [. . .], [and] it’s coming at you slant, which to me is more like what life is than [. . .] straight lines’ (‘Masterclass’). It is ‘a fluid form’ (‘Not Knowing’).

³ There is an interesting tension between the idea of the short story as incorporating dialogue and the short story as incorporating transgression. What might this mean for the short story’s invitation to the reader? Transgression implies a sense of trespass that is lacking from dialogue. What might this imply for the short story as a form in debate with itself, and one capable of promoting a sense of Wells Tower’s ‘excess meaning’?

⁴ Nam Le was born in Vietnam, but grew up in Australia. His debut collection, *The Boat*, was published to critical acclaim in 2008. He is a writer of enormous range: *The Boat* is not only a very international collection, but has an eclectic cast, ranging from an aging painter to a teenage hit man. Le is a humane writer who draws on the body and the senses as he seeks an empathetic understanding of his characters. He has said that he is drawn to ‘minds and sensibilities that we would normally see only from the outside, in a simplistic and reductive way’ (Winn). For more detail on Le, see Appendix A for my author essay from the *Critical Survey of Short Fiction (4th Edition)*.

⁵ Irving Howe is aware of these risks at the level of reference, even, and suggests that 'with a historical event such as the Holocaust [. . .] the phrase "such as" cannot really be employed' (429).

⁶ I am grateful to Professor Michael Trussler for directing me towards Irving Howe on this issue.

⁷ Variations on this incantation include, 'We are safe here' and 'You will be safe there' (TB 168)

⁸ Le works with delicacy as he seeks to establish a liminal narrative space promoting temporal flux, and with it an affecting dialogue between life and death. Delicacy is less important and transgression employed to brilliant effect in both 'In At The Birth' by William Trevor (102-112), and 'So Much Water So Close To Home' by Raymond Carver (*Where I'm Calling From* 173-193). In both instances the dialogue of life and death is compressed to an uncomfortable degree, promoting a transgressive muddling of categories and, particularly in Carver, drawing on a sense of taboo. Pettinah Gappah's 'An Elegy for Easterly' is another memorable example (27-54).

⁹ Winther reserves the term 'closural marker' for the 'narrative element that *delivers* on that promise' of closure ('Closure' 64). With these distinctions he refines closural categories from John Gerlach's study, *Towards the End: Closure and Structure in the American Short Story*.

¹⁰ Winther goes on to suggest that: 'Only when we arrive at an understanding of the true import of the events and situations described in a story, the larger significance of the more or less intricate figures in the textual carpet, do we achieve a genuine sense of having brought matters to rest' ('Closure' 63). I must admit to liking Winther's definition less for this suggestion that hermeneutical matters might be brought to rest, and in the case of Le it sits uneasily for obvious reasons. It should be noted however that Winther's comment is made within the context of discussion of a specific methodological technique for tracking textual signals to trace meaning.

¹¹ As an element of a 'threshold poetics' Aguirre's 'phasing' implies telic progression: 'Significance is a function of phasing which emerges from the placing of an event, any event, in a continuum' ('Phasing' 21). Phasing 'exhibits the ending as the last link in a logical chain of happenings, and therefore gives the ending the quality of the predictable, and so of the inevitable' (21). While the ending of 'Hiroshima' is arguably both predictable and inevitable from its very title, Aguirre's suggestion that 'phasing' gives any resolution *heightened* value is, in Le's case, very important. While Aguirre's own subject is the fairytale, the suggestion that 'phasing' might imply 'suspense' (21) is more problematic for Le.

¹² I am suggesting that a strong sense of linear progression combines with temporal disruption to create the heightened narrative space of 'Hiroshima'. 'Phasing' in this case works to a double paradoxical purpose, promoting linear progression while also disrupting that progression and any associated suspense.

¹³ By way of comparison, and in a very different context, an effective 'phasing' of action is apparent in the stories 'The Swimmer' and 'Reunion' by John Cheever (726-737, 622-625).

¹⁴ 'Defamiliarization' is defined as: 'Making the familiar strange by impeding automatic, habitual ways of perceiving' (Prince 18).

¹⁵ I am grateful to Dr Paul March-Russell for directing me towards the work of Walter Benjamin, whose work on 'messianic time' and the 'dialectical image' is relevant to such debate. Trussler himself refers to the 'dialectical image' as a challenge to 'sequential narrative' ('Suspended' 564). The dialectical image 'contains the potential to interrupt, hence to counteract modes of perception and cognition that have become second nature' (Pensky 179). On 'messianic time' Benjamin writes, '[t]hinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well'; 'a Messianic cessation of happening' represents 'a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past' (262-3). There is certainly rich potential for further study of Benjamin in relation to the threshold dynamics of the short story. A more expansive study could likewise accommodate both Henri Bergson and Mikhail Bakhtin on temporality.

¹⁶ In fact Trussler is writing about Katharine Mansfield's 'The Garden Party'.

¹⁷ For another exploration of trauma and body memory in the contemporary short story, one effective for drawing on mundane and yet powerfully metaphoric detail, see Julie Orringer's 'The Isabel Fish' (47-75).

¹⁸ There is an interesting tension between those ethical dangers attached to the domestication and over-familiarisation of historical material (Howe 429), and the empathetic charge that can result from forging an allegiance with the reader through mundane and physical connectives. Furthermore, while Charles E. May has suggested that the short story, unlike the novel, 'defamiliarizes' and 'breaks up the familiar life-world of the everyday' ('Nature of Knowledge' 137), temporal dislocation and 'defamiliarization' work hand in hand with familiar connectives in Le's 'Hiroshima' to great, if paradoxical, effect. I cannot agree with May that 'the short story attempts to be authentic to the immaterial reality of the inner world of the self in its relation to eternal rather than temporal reality' (133). Such a conception seems to divorce the form from a source of tremendous tension and agency: humankind's 'time-bound', sensate existence.

¹⁹ David Means is an American writer who has produced four collections of short stories to date: *A Quick Kiss of Redemption* (1991), *Assorted Fire Events* (2000), *The Secret Goldfish* (2004), and most recently, *The Spot* (2010). Maria Russo has written of his work that he 'never rests easy or settles comfortably into a simple explanation for human behaviour' ('Burning'). Means has said that when writing stories '[a]ll five senses have to be totally alive to what's happening' ('The Rumpus'). He has also said that he doesn't do many interviews because '[t]here's a nexus where the writing meets the reader, and when I begin to answer questions, it feels to me like I'm trying to step into that space between the reader's eye and the page' ('The Rumpus'). For a more comprehensive study of Means' body of work see Philip Langeskov's Ph.D. thesis, *Means of Discomfort: Narrative and its Dysfunctions in the Short Fiction of David Means*. His discussion of 'Railroad Incident, August 1995' draws on Nicholas Royle's concept of 'veering' and Roman Ingarden's concept of 'concretization' (Langeskov 283, 285-6).

²⁰ Any semblance of hope works as textual resistance; for instance, an alternative version that Means offers of HH's evening, where, instead of ending up on the railroad, he could follow instead his usual Friday night routine. He could have gone into the city, and to the Lincoln Center where he would listen to Brahms and remember making love to his wife (4). While such alternative scenarios are tempered by their conditionality – 'it would, if he had gone'; 'he would, had he gone into the city' (10) – they are vividly drawn and insistent.

²¹ An 'overt narrator' is defined as: 'A narrator presenting situations and events with more than a minimum of narratorial mediation' (Prince 69). An 'intrusive narrator' is defined as: 'A (distancing or engaging, ironic or earnest) narrator commenting in his or her own voice on the situations and events presented, their presentation, or its context; a narrator relying on and characterized by commentarial excursions or intrusions' (46-47).

²² With a 'variable point of view': 'the perspective of several characters is adopted in turn to present different sequences of events' (Prince 75). With 'multiple points of view': 'the same event or sequence of events is narrated more than once, each time in terms of a different perspective' (75).

²³ Such a doubling implies that while '[o]ne principle emphasizes the primacy of event over meaning (insists upon event as the origin of meaning) [. . .] the other stresses the primacy of meaning and its requirements (insists upon event as the effect of a will to meaning)' (Prince 23).

²⁴ Of 'distance' Prince writes: 'Along with perspective, [it is] one of two major factors regulating narrative information (Genette). The more covert the narratorial mediation and the more numerous the details provided about the narrated situations and events, the smaller the distance that is said to obtain between them and their narration' (22).

²⁵ 'Dissonance' is described in narratological terms as the result of '[t]he narrator's distancing of the character's consciousness [. . .]' (Prince: 22).

²⁶ Of 'negation' Iser writes: 'The various types of negation invoke familiar and determinate elements or knowledge only to cancel them out. What is cancelled, however, remains in view, and thus brings

about modifications in the reader's attitude toward what is familiar or determinate – that is, he is guided to adopt a position *in relation* to the text' (*Prospecting* 34).

²⁷ Means' account of HH's memory of his first night with his future wife is another example of this play of creation-negation (10). Means establishes that this is a memory he would have had, had he followed his usual Friday night routine and gone to listen to music at the Lincoln Center. There he would have remembered that night in an 'idealized and sentimentalized' version, unlike the 'truth' which was 'awkward kisses, teeth clicking; shame over certain deformities' (10-11).

²⁸ This play of viscerally charged narrative proximity and distance surely relates to David Constantine's claim that the short story has the capacity to be 'viscerally antagonistic' ('Masterclass').

²⁹ 'Double focalization' implies '[t]he concurrence of two different focalizations in the rendering of a particular situation or event', and implies a shift of point of view from one close to the man to one that is more distanced, or even 'objective' (Prince 23).

AFTERWORD

The short story has the capacity to be profoundly inclusive. If it can, formally, be viewed as a metaphor for what Brooks describes as ‘our negotiations with reality’ (*Reading* xi), it is as a shape-shifter, reflective of the contradictions and tensions inherent in these negotiations, which are so often messy, hopeful, thwarted, unresolved. While the short story can claim the prerogative to promote order and concord, some of the most exciting contemporary writing pushes the form further, challenging the reader to inhabit a threshold space of rich potential.

David Constantine writes that ‘closure is a false goal’ (‘Not Knowing’). However, the charge of desire for the ending, as much as fear of the ending, can be channelled to augment the ‘live’ quality of the short form. While the ‘sense of an ending’ – and with it the possibility of synthesis and resolution – is ever-present, it accompanies the short story both as potent promise and potent threat. The metaphorical charge of the short story signals the form’s capacity to dwell in the borderlines of meaning, and those borderlines are further activated and animated by the work of strategies such as repetition and omission which promote flux and indeterminacy.

What has become apparent in this study of the contemporary short story is the degree to which textual strategy and form can become interwoven with meaning, so that they appear ‘mutually determinative’ (*Ritual Process* 127), conducting a dialogue on ‘what form is and how we are made’, on ‘the life of form and the form of life’ as Smith puts it (‘All there is’ 81). Jonathan Culler identifies a dialogue of poetics and hermeneutics in the work of literary criticism (*Literary Theory* 62). Such dialogue should be particularly active in the case of the short story, as a form that is in such active debate with itself.

Claire Drewery identifies states of liminality in modernist short stories as ‘fleeting and ephemeral’ while also suggesting that liminality is a ‘recurring and subversive presence throughout human existence’ (123). I believe not only that the short story is singularly well placed to represent the flux and uncertainty of contemporary life, but also that the short story form – at its very best – does not fleetingly visit, but *embodies* heightened thresholds of meaning and understanding, those metamorphic, liminal spaces that by their very nature promote ongoing dialogue. Culler further suggests that ‘poetics is always vulnerable to accusations of

trying to systematize an object or practice, literature, that is valued for escaping or evading system' (*Literary in Theory* 10). The notion of a 'threshold poetics' is best applied speculatively rather than as a fixed concept: not least, in this instance, for setting out to take into account the short story's metamorphic nature.

Belén Piqueras observes that 'liminality can become the very formula of resistance and dissent in the artistic sphere'; that '[t]he denial and violation of established artistic categories and semantic guidelines is an act of transgression, a metaphorical "crossing" always performed on the basis of a liminal programme' (2). It would be wrong for any delineation of a 'threshold poetics' of the short story, by following such an agenda, and in its 'reassessment of formal paradigms' (6), to deny the form's unifying potential and to dismiss longstanding theory as without worth. However, there is an unquestionable need for critical correctives to essentialist approaches to the form. It is my hope that this essay will promote further dialogue on the form's sensate and metaphorical charge, on its metamorphic nature, and on a 'threshold poetics' of the short story as a method of approach to both the art of the form and to the study of that art, contributing to valuable and growing debate around the short story as a threshold form.

Appendix A.

‘Nam Le: A Critical Essay’ (written by Katherine Orr) published in *Critical Survey of Short Fiction (4th Edition)* (Salem Press, Jan 2012)

Born: Rach Gia, Vietnam; October 15, 1978

Principal Short Fiction

The Boat, 2008

Other literary forms

Nam Le is known primarily for short fiction.

Achievements

Nam Le’s first published book, *The Boat* (2008), has brought him international recognition. Having won the Pushcart Prize in 2007 for the short story “Cartagena,” Le has since been the recipient of numerous awards, including the Michener-Copernicus Society of America Award, the Dylan Thomas Prize and the Australian Prime Minister’s Literary Award. He was chosen as one of the authors for the U.S. National Book Foundation’s “5 under 35” Fiction selection, and as the best debut of 2008 by *New York Magazine* and the *Australian Book Review*. Stories from *The Boat* have been widely anthologized. “Meeting Elise” was included in *The Best Australian Stories 2008*, edited by Delia Falconer; “Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice” appeared in *Best New American Voices 2009*, edited by Mary Gaitskill; and “The Boat” was published in *The Penguin Book of the Ocean* (2010), edited by James Bradley. *The Boat* has been translated into thirteen languages, and was chosen as a book of the year by *Amazon*, *Publishers Weekly*, *The Guardian* and *The Los Angeles Times* among others. Le has been awarded a number of fellowships for his work.

Biography

Nam Le was born in Rach Gia, Vietnam on October 15, 1978. He has two brothers, and is the middle child. His family fled Vietnam after the war, and following a spell in a Malaysian refugee camp arrived in Melbourne in 1979. In Australia, Le’s parents at first depended on a combination of charitable donations and factory work, though

later his mother found work with the postal service and as a chef, while his father became the outreach director of a children's center. In 1991 Le won a scholarship to Melbourne Grammar School, and went on to win Premier's Awards in English and Literature, as well as the inaugural National Scholarship to the University of Melbourne. At university he studied arts and law, while also spending time playing soccer, writing poetry, and editing the student paper, *Farrago*. His dream at that stage was of becoming a poet. His honours thesis was on W.H. Auden, and was written in rhyming couplets. After university he worked as a lawyer in a large corporate firm, before taking out a loan and spending a year travelling the world. It was during this year that he began work on a novel, the opening chapters of which won him a Truman Capote Fellowship to Iowa Writers' Workshop in 2004, where he was taught by Marilynne Robinson, Ethan Canin and the late Frank Conroy. He finished the novel—a 700-page coming-of-age tale set in Melbourne—but it remains unpublished. It was at Iowa that Le fell in love with the short story form, and began studying and writing stories in a focused way. His first published story was “Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice,” which appeared in *Zoetrope* in 2006. The same story was published the following year in Australia both in *Overland*, and in *Best Australian Stories 2007*. On publication in 2008, *The Boat* was immediately commended by Michiko Kakutani, an influential critic at *The New York Times*. It was later selected as a 2008 *New York Times* Notable Book, and found its way on to numerous lists for Best Books of 2008. It has continued to make bestseller lists around the world. Le has since won several awards, including the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story, and the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. Since leaving Iowa, he has been awarded fellowships to the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and to the Phillips Exeter Academy, New Hampshire, among others. Le has worked some of his own family history into his stories—his father spent time in a re-education camp after the war, and Le draws on this in both “The Boat” and “Love and Honor.” However, research also plays a crucial part in his approach to writing. He has cited Auden, Eliot, Rilke and Tennyson as literary influences. He is represented by Eric Simonoff at the William Morris Agency, and splits his time between Australia and abroad. He is the editor of the *Harvard Review*.

Analysis

Nam Le's award-winning first book, *The Boat*, finds unity as a collection through the writer's consistently protean approach to the short story. A quality of variousness characterizes Le's work, both in the characters he portrays and in the international settings that he favors. Noted especially for this range as a young writer, he has been accused of overstretching himself, but is generally admired both for his ambition and seriousness. In the collection's opening story, Le explores transnationalism through an intentionally self-conscious engagement with his cultural heritage: he was born in Vietnam, raised in Australia, and went on to study creative writing in the United States. However, Le is not a writer whose interest is dominated by the autobiographical. More typically, his focus finds form in radically diverse perspectives and dramatic plotlines as much as in his choice of time and place: his narrators include an aging painter in contemporary New York, a young girl from Hiroshima in 1945, and a teenage hit man from Columbia. While this literary shape-shifting is arguably the most consistent feature of Le's work, recurrent concerns include masculinity, the inner or emotional life, and rites of passage, including, but not limited to, explorations of coming-of-age. He often builds narrative tension through skillful plotting, while simultaneously exploring the emotional impact of events. Le works with either first person or third person perspectives, in both cases drawing heavily on the body and the senses to find empathetic routes into the moral worlds of his characters. This determination to find a common sense of humanity also manifests in Le's recurrent use of the imagery of water. He draws on associations of fluidity and connectedness—both as a hopeful counterpoint to alienation and dislocation, and as a darker expression of the vicissitudes of fortune. Le's stories frequently culminate in critical, heightened moments which pull the internal and external worlds of his protagonists together. Stylistically, Le juxtaposes the literary and poetic with the colloquial. A strong sense of place is communicated as much through language as through the physical landscape and cultural mores of the country Le is writing about.

“Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice”

“Love and Honor,” the opening story in *The Boat*, is a playful hybrid of autobiography and imagination, in which Le casts himself as a character. Though

many of the details are taken directly from his own life, he makes no attempt to draw clear boundaries as to where fact ends and fiction begins. This is a deliberately self-conscious, metafictional work, written in first person, at times directly addressing the reader. Le lends a wry tone to his portrait of life in a creative writing school, as his baffled alter ego struggles with the advice thrown his way by agents and tutors on how to succeed, while making clichéd bids for inspiration by drinking Scotch and writing on an old Smith Corona typewriter. Alongside this lightness of touch, however, is a deeper questioning of issues of morality and authenticity involved in the writer's life: struggling to find inspiration for his next submission at Iowa Writers' Workshop, and with a deadline looming, "Nam Le" draws on his father's personal account of experiences in the Vietnam War. The writer's dilemma that both author and alter ego face is: 'How can I authentically inhabit someone else's experience?' Overall, the story seems to suggest that while this is an almost impossible challenge, nothing could be more important than making the attempt. Le reiterates this sentiment throughout the collection.

Thematically "Love and Honor" engages with father-son relations, family bonds and betrayals, the legacy of war, and questions of cultural identity. In common with many of his stories, the body is a tool of understanding: in this case "Nam Le's" father physically demonstrates the torture poses used in the war for his son. The title of the story numbers the old truths that Faulkner claimed writers should tackle in their work, and may be one reason that some critics have suggested the story can be read as a manifesto. Certainly, these themes resurface throughout *The Boat*, not least in the title story, which can be read as a more traditional companion piece to "Love and Honor."

"Cartagena"

As with "Hiroshima" and "The Boat," in "Cartagena" Le writes about children who are old before their time; this is a coming-of-age tale, but the rites-of-passage involved are premature. Ron, the narrator, is a teenage hit man, having grown up as part of a gang in a barrio in Medellín, Columbia. His father died when he was nine, and it was then that he became a man in his mother's eyes. His life—one of guns, drugs and drink—is lived in the shadow of his employer, El Padre. Having failed to make a hit, Ron is summoned by El Padre: his days are numbered. His dream is to

see the ocean in Cartagena, but as a wish it has the hollow ring of Chekhov's Moscow in *Three Sisters*. "Cartagena" is a structurally sophisticated crime thriller: the stakes are always high, and the sense of momentum draws on moments of revelation throughout. While Le presents a dramatic storyline, he also takes the reader beneath the surface to explore Ron's vulnerability and his inner life. He draws on visceral details—sweat on palms, cold metal against skin—to ground Ron's experience, drawing it close. Le characteristically locates cultural resonance through language: in this case the story is infused with Spanish, in the form of idiomatic dialogue, restructured phraseology, and untranslated slang.

"Hiroshima"

"Hiroshima" is narrated in the first person by Mayako, a young girl living in a temple just outside Hiroshima. It is 1945, and along with a number of other children, she has been evacuated for safety. Her parents are still living in the city, and both her brother and sister are actively involved in serving their country. These are the days and hours before the atomic bomb is dropped—the story ends with a fateful flash of white light. Short, simple sentences give a sense of the child's lightness, energy and roving attention, while a fluid stream-of-consciousness gives the overall impression of a continuous present. Le uses a palette of references for Mayako's world: the temple in the hills where she has been told she will be safe; the slogans of war she has been fed over the radio; the memory she has of the flash that went off when a family photograph was taken; the image she recalls of her father standing in the rain. Having established these, he returns to them, over and over, creating a vivid impression of her inner life. The juxtaposition of wartime slogans and child's patter serves to highlight the odd world that Mayako inhabits; indoctrination infuses her consciousness. Le uses foreshadowing to fold time back on itself, drawing the future into the present by invoking common knowledge of both the immediate and longer-term effects of the atomic bomb: the black rain, a city reduced to rubble and powder, the blinding white light, and the horrific illnesses that survivors had to suffer. He creates a pattern of ominous resonances throughout the narrative, making repeated references to rain, to dust, to the bright flash as the photograph is taken, to the odd wheezing sound the radio sometimes makes. There is a bleak irony in Mayako's assertion that many planes in the sky signify danger, whereas a single plane is not to be feared. As the story progresses, Le accelerates the shifts between images, ideas

and memories, creating an impression of relentless motion towards the inevitable ending. By juxtaposing symbols of plenty—food, flowers, trees, a dragonfly, moss—with those associated with loss, Le creates an ongoing meditation on both impermanence and the moment that Hiroshima disappeared.

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Kakutani, Michiko. "A World of Stories From a Son of Vietnam." *The New York Times*, May 13, 2008. *The Boat* has been widely reviewed, but this piece is a considered and useful overview of the collection as a whole. Both the title story and "Love and Honor" are considered in more depth.

<http://www.pen.org/printmedia.php/prmMediaID/4027>. A transcript of a conversation between Richard Ford and Nam Le which took place at the 2009 PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature at the PEN American Center. A wide-ranging and often entertaining discussion in which the two writers consider literature in relation to law, science and politics. They also consider the role of writers as outsiders, and debate the limitations of character-based fiction. Via this link, it is possible to listen to the full conversation online, and to order an extended version of the transcript in *PEN America 11: Make Believe*.

<http://www.bombsite.com/issues/108/articles/3305>. A substantial interview with Nam Le, conducted by the writer Charles D'Ambrosio for *BOMB Magazine*. Opens with a discussion of Hemingway and metafictional approaches to writing, offering insight into why Le wrote "Love and Honor." Le speaks of the act of reading, of his belief in shaking up frames of reference for the reader, and of what style means to him. The interview concludes with an illuminating conversation on Le's obsession with the sea.

<http://www.namleonline.com>. Nam Le's own website is regularly updated, and has useful links to reviews and interviews. It offers a chronology of events related to the release of *The Boat*, including details of the awards Le has won.

Lee, Chrisopher. "Asian American Literature And The Resistances Of Theory." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 56, no. 1, (Spring, 2010): 19-39. Examines *The Boat* within the context of Asian American Studies, with a particular focus on "Love and Honor." Questions whether the collection can be read as an Asian American text, while

suggesting that Le himself, through fiction, challenges both the coherence and the limitations of such theoretical categorization.

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