



Creative Writing Portfolio

Emily Adams

'Shadows' (193 words)

'The Aircraft' (313 words)

'Lunchtime at the Coffee Shop' (514 words)

'The Widow's House' and 'The Officer' (15 words and 53 words)

'Just' (82 words)

'How to Pretend' (181 words)

'David' (254 words)

'How to Watch' (170 words)

'The Accident' (845 words)

'Donny and Stretcho' (1367 words)

Editing Commentary of 'Damage' (798 words)

Draft 1 of 'Damage'

Draft 2 of 'Damage'

'Damage' (926 words)

Reflective Commentary (2111 words)

Shadows

His passion was surfing. The constant chase. The buzz you got from hunting a wave, the rush when you found one. It was invigorating. His life was the ocean, he was more at home in water than on land. Brisbane was beautiful, but it paled in comparison to the glittering ripples and the foamy surf as it crashed on the rocks. It was an ordinary Tuesday afternoon. The waves reared high, and today the sea loved him. He owned it; he tamed the thrashing head and rolling eyes of the ocean.

A dark shadow in the blue.
A blip in reality.

Shiny, smooth, slicing the water in two. He panicked, wide-eyed, jerking limbs. Concentrate Charlie, but the board buckled underneath as something hard hit it, and he was slammed into his untamed wave.

His confidence hid behind blurry grey and choking breath. He'd always been told that a man faced his fears.
He shuddered as he looked into the black.

Prompt: This was written as a flash-fiction piece during an in-class timed writing exercise. We were given general topics – I chose 'swimming' – and a limit of approximately 150 words for the complete story.

The Aircraft

The tall peaks are joined by angled stretches of brown flats. The ridges of the peaks, pushed together over millions of years, form vein-like bruise-black ribbons over the land if seen from above. They look like connections; synapses and nerves. The brain, in green and brown.

Near one part of the veiny ridge, there was once a sparkle of amber. It looked like neurons firing, or damage. The start of something so small, growing intrusively, unwelcome perhaps. An anomaly within the ferns.

Among the vines and low-hanging branches in this distant part of the world, an old flying machine celebrates its one hundred year old association with the jungle floor. The trees are only just learning to accept the machine's permanence within their peaceful roots, having been most astonished by the machine's rude imposition some years before.

The aircraft's age is certainly starting to tell. Its dilapidated wings, shaped like a bird's, droop solemnly from its simple frame. It is depressed. Floor creepers have found the edges of the wings, pulling them down as they extend, snake-like, up; making the plane's domed structure look like it has grown out of the entangled base. Little bits of smooth, sharp-edged bone are sprinkled inside the cockpit of the machine, at the end which is most intimately connected to the snarled jungle floor. These are what is left of the inventor's skull, which was cracked upon impact. His skeletal bones are littered, mish-mashed, around the whole site. It is pretty to look at, this structure. Like a little tumour, protruding from the flat.

Prompt: This is a combination of two pieces which I think work quite well together. The first section comes from a class exercise in which we were given pictures and asked to describe 'place'. The remaining two sections are from an exercise in which we were asked to think of a distant object.

Lunchtime at the Coffee Shop

I wait in the coffee bar opposite the underground station. It is where we first met. He let me go first because I was wearing a uniform with a short skirt.

I look at my watch.

He comes in, late. The door slams behind him. A few people look over. He puffs his chest as he approaches my table. He does not look at me. He puts his jacket on the back of the chair opposite mine, and smooths out the back. Then he gets in the queue. A while later he comes back with a latte, for himself. He sits.

What do you want, Claire? You know I've got a case right now. I've got a lot on.

I look at him in his expensive suit. I look at his folded arms, his hands, his nails which are clean. His tie-clip.

You look good, I say.

You look a state, he replies. Try some make-up, it'll do you good. He looks smug.

I was sick this morning, James, I say.

His jaw twitches. He moves forward, lowers his voice.

Look, I said I was sorry, alright? I didn't know I had it, and it's not like I gave it to you for a laugh.

He leans back, away from me. His lips are a thin line.

It's not that, I say.

His body jerks towards me again.

Then what is it? No offence Claire, but if you've just dragged me out of work for a little chit-chat then I suggest we do this some other time. He unfolds his arms, to drink his coffee.

There are creases appearing in the arms of his shirt.

I'm pregnant, James. It's yours.

He looks me in the eye, then swallows. He says nothing. I look down. I see his feet beneath the table. His shoes are black, shiny. He is wearing the socks that I bought him. They have a picture of grinning cartoon face on them, and say Trust me, I'm a sockin' lawyer!

He clears his throat.

You were on the pill, he says.

I know, I say. It's not a hundred percent.

You did this on purpose, he accuses. You've been broody ever since that kid died at the hospital. You tricked me.

I didn't, I say.

He breathes quickly. There are marks on the table where his hands have been.

How much d'you want, then? I assume you're keeping it.

I sigh. I don't want your money, James.

His face softens. He looks down.

I can't have a baby in my life, Claire. It just won't fit.

He runs his fingers through his hair. There are wet patches under his arms. The tie-clip is crooked. I stand to leave.

I just thought you should know, I say.

Prompt: This piece has arisen from the study of 'Scene', and a 'stripped' style of writing in which the perspective is largely external. I particularly enjoyed writing in this style after reading works by Raymond Carver who uses the technique. It was a challenge having to choose words carefully whilst still conveying a realistic story.

The Widow's House

Like delicate glass,
A frosted labyrinth
Among the shadows.

Prompt: Poetry in the haiku form.

The Officer

In the field your face divides by the eye's crinkles.
You smile at the jackal;
The rubble of shattered sunshine.

Prompt: This short poem followed from the haiku exercises we did in the workshops. I also gained inspiration from Wilfred Owen, regarding the subject matter, and Ezra Pound regarding the short abstract form.

Just

I'm
 sorry
 I didn't
 cry
 When I
 left
 you.

I did it for us
 and for England.
 We should
 not let
 our
 tears
 fall;
 that's what they say.

I'm
 sorry
 I didn't
 cry
 When I
 left
 you

I am
 with
 Owen,
 sewn-short.
 I
 cried then.

Prompt: This was an experimentation of how poetry can be set out upon a page, and also gained inspiration from the 'note' poems covered in the workshop, such as William Carlos Williams' 'This is Just to Say'.

How to Pretend

In your world you are the creator.
 This is the life sewn across your eyelids;
 The mesh of lash on lash within
 An etched cut-out of a sphere.

Distortion is insolent, but whittled away
 To abstract perfection;
 Whitewashed so that every sin
 Has the same hue.

Shall the jaunty slant of hats and ties,
 And a cigarette stump half-smoked
 Confirm what we have always known?
 I think it must.

You are human like the rest. I can touch you.
 You are the dreamer who wrenches up faces
 And forces confessions of dispensability.
 A scratch reveals the performer, unmasked.

The sphere has no patience for passers-by;
 Idle cares and time that should be spent in sleep
 Are captured and consumed, and
 In the air stagnates a murky truth:

Something else lies in the unexpected,
 Untouched, that you never knew;

Something else.

Prompt: This poem arose from the studies in the class workshop of 'How To' poems, such as Cathy Grindrod's 'How to Make Apple Crumble'. I liked the idea of a poem which was instructional but actually was fairly abstract in subject-matter.

David

We had such hope then, we rallied
The group and wished uncertain wishes
With wavering smiles and sturdy pats on arms.

We did not falter when you could not walk,
Stayed brave-faced when your hand gripped
Ours and would not let go. It would, in a minute.

I gave up faith when you were gone though
You kept yours. It does no good talking to the air
But I can still remember you in song,

And holidays in the dales, your favourite place
A little town with cobbled streets
And smoke curling from chimney tops.

Being young we'd build forts in rivers
To change their tracks. We never won,
And you'd look on and laugh from afar,

A mug of something hot held in your palms;
We'd all huddle together drinking soup
Between two big cars on a bluff.

That's where you are.

Prompt: Originally, this started as a short story following 'Memoir' exercises in class. It remained unfinished, and I later returned to rework it an experimentation of a sonnet. However, as the poem progressed I struggled to maintain the specific sonnet structure, and so changed the form of the poem to a looser structure; both in rhyme and form. I also enjoyed experimenting with punctuation and the technical structure of the poem overall where one stanza is either broken up by caesural pauses or runs into the next; this I was inspired to try through the poetry of Wilfred Owen and TS Eliot, who were both typically 'loose' in their poetical structures.

How to Watch

Constant.
 Overwhelming, pulsating
 Noise.
 Splintering the ears like slices of glass
 Pushed under fingernails.

Intrusive.

Flashes of mock anger from flirting girls,
 Fashion followers, flip flops and bitchy stares.
 Baggy jumpers, red coats to Reinvent the Self,
 Slogans on clothing to carve out personalities.
 A girl walks past in tears.

Imposing.

An old man reads a newspaper as crinkled as his face,
 And oofs when he sits down.
 Little men, walking with a practised slouch,
 Throw sideways glances at girls too wide to fit in skirts
 And sneer.

Encroaching.

The quiet ones scream inwardly,
 Internal noise stuffed silent by invisible fists.
 Escaping damnation of social selection by
 Skittering, like insects running from light.
 Rebelling from the shoe-straps of middle-class life.

Whispers.
 Shouts. The unending blare,
 A ragged web of woven noise
 Cracking the eardrums and seeping through
 Intrusive invading repulsive repulsive

Peace.
 Peace.
 Sleep.

Prompt: Again, this poem arose from the 'How To' poem style studied in a class workshop. I enjoyed experimenting with an episodic structure in this poem.

The Accident

Caroline knew that James was their father's favourite. It had crippled him when James had died. She had been in college, and the professor had disrupted her art class and had asked her to come with him to her office. At the time she'd felt annoyed, preoccupied by concerns for her unfinished painting. The layering of the paint upon the canvas was so vital that if it dried out too much without her completing it, it'd be ruined.

The professor had been very kind. Caroline remembered being asked to sit down. So polite. He couldn't quite meet her eye, and for a while they sat opposite each other in silence while he chewed his lip and looked at his hands. Caroline sighed. At the noise, he appeared to recollect himself and explain to her in hushed tones about the Terrible News. She was excused. Her mother was waiting at the entrance. She needed to go to the hospital. Don't worry about the work, he'd see to it.

The painting would be ruined. The layering.

She'd backed out of the office amid apologies and a sweaty pat on the shoulder. She couldn't remember walking to the college entrance, but was startled when her mother's old Citron came into view. A woman was leaning awkwardly on the frame, too upright to look relaxed. All the sunshine from her mother's face had been sapped out of it. Her eyes were crimson and looked too small for her face, as if they had shrunk into their sockets. Her arms were folded around her body to form a protective cocoon, but the nails were digging into the skin. It was as though she had a cavity of blank space in her between the two sides of her chest that she was trying to piece together.

They didn't speak at all. There was nothing to say. Her mother simply nodded in the direction of the passenger seat, and got in the car herself. Caroline got in, and fastened her seat belt. Her mother's hands on the steering wheel were shaking, and she wondered vaguely if she'd be okay to drive. It didn't matter. She didn't notice the journey. Staring blankly out of the window, she didn't care about the trees or the buildings or the people that streaked past the glass, or the myriads of golden and red leaves piled along the pavements. Every so often, she'd become aware of a pounding inside her head, an ache that scratched down her temples and crept to her clenched jaw. Then she'd simply give in to the blankness again, her face becoming a static marble carving, and the pounding would disappear.

They arrived at the hospital at 3.32pm, but James had died at 3.28pm. Four minutes between seeing her brother in his last moments of life and seeing his broken body laid out still and silently upon the hospital bed. He'd been hit by a lorry as it turned a sharp bend, apparently. A young man on a motorbike didn't stand a chance. That bend was notorious for this kind of thing. He was the third one this year. They really should do something about it. It was astonishing that he hadn't died upon impact, horrible that he should have suffered on for the forty-eight minutes between the hit and his death. That memory of James in a sideroom of the emergency surgery ward, covered with a white sheet, would remain forever branded on the back of her eyelids. They hadn't even had the chance to say goodbye. She thought of the last thing she'd said to him, something insignificant like hurry up in the bathroom. It was such a waste.

After two months spent at home with the blinds pulled down, she returned to college. People were very nice. They said how sorry they were, how tragic it was. What a waste. Was she holding up okay? So polite. She answered yes, thank you, yes it was tragic, we're getting on

alright, thank you, he wouldn't have wanted us to mope. Yes, we did receive your card, thank you. A sombre look down at her feet, a shuffling of weight from one leg to another. It became automatic. After a few days, the people left her alone.

She went back to the studio about a week after her arrival. Her painting had been put in the storage room, in the dark. It had dried, unfinished. Some of the layers had dropped whilst still wet, bleeding into other sections. There was a large blank patch where the main design would have been, woven canvas amid the bright strips of colour. The rush of painted, vibrant life she'd been creating seemed idiotic. It was ruined anyway, as she knew it would be. She put it back into the dark room.

Prompt: This story developed from a workshop exercise in which we were given the first line and asked to expand the story from there. The piece was originally shorter, but I followed advice from Robbie about returning to the painting to end the piece.

Donny and Stretcho

I exist in the fade-out. You know, like at the end of a song. They fade out the music when there's nothing more to sing, no more feeling left to translate into lyrics and notes. That's me. I walk around the concrete blocks of the college that used to define my life, along concrete pathways and gated entrances. I am not noticed.

Talk about inspirational. All I can see is tinged with grey, and it's a cliché. Someone famous once said I think, therefore I am.

I think, but I'm not.

I used to have friends and make small-talk in corridors. They didn't care that Mum was a basket-case. I was good at sport. It didn't make sense, because I'm not very big or pumped like Donny. I'm skinny, in fact you might call me lanky, so I didn't really fit in with them anyway. Donny called me Stretcho, which caught on. Everyone loves Donny. He plays rugby and has got a dodgy ear because of it. It is permanently and revoltingly engorged, but he likes it. He shows it off, when he's chatting up girls. They're impressed.

I don't get it. It's an ear.

He used to give me the time of day. We were mates. I played tennis which didn't make me popular, but because I hung out with Donny everyone kind of like me. I always knew it wasn't real though. If he'd have turned around one day and said "Oi Stretcho, piss off" everyone would've ditched me too.

He was alright, Donny. He didn't have to hang out with me, but he did anyway because our mothers became friends when we were in prep school. They used to see each other a lot, go round for tea and stuff like that. That was when Mum was normal. We'd hang around outside. He had a massive garden, much better than our grimy square of yellow grass. We used to play detectives in it when we were younger; we had sticks for guns. I got a magnifying glass free in a comic book once, and we used it to burn holes in things. Then he burnt a spider to death, and I stomped on the glass and didn't talk to him for two weeks. Eventually he said he was sorry and gave me his Snickers bar to make up for it.

When we went into senior school, he looked out for me. I got started on in my first week by some pill popping gits when I wouldn't buy some of their stash, and he beat the shit out of them for me. His attitude towards drugs and that used to be pretty black and white. The line got blurrier as we got older, when he and his rugby lads started smoking pot behind the changing rooms. It didn't affect his playing though, so it wasn't like it was a big deal. I did it a few times, too, but I was always nervous about getting caught. Most of the time it just made me feel dizzy and tired. When the others had grins the size of half-watermelons, I just laughed along and pretended to feel the buzz too.

Mum smelt it on me when I got back after the first time, and she gave me a black eye. She told me that if God had wanted me to suck on a green cancer stick, He would've made it legal, and did I really think Jesus died for me so that I could pollute my lungs and then get addicted to needles. That's what con-men, musicians and whores did. Did I *want* to end up like them? She didn't think so. I was grounded for a month. She made me feed Rosie every night because she couldn't be arsed. I was more careful after that. I don't even know why I kept it up; I didn't really like it that much anyway. I guess Donny did it, so I did.

Anyway, I'm digressing. Sorry about that. It happens when you've got endless time and nobody to talk to but yourself.

I follow Donny around because it's normal. I always thought his life was so great, but it's actually pretty dull. He gets up late most mornings, with a headache. We're in our final year, so he can get away with missing assembly most of the time. He drives in, goes to lessons, bunks a few at the end of the day when he fancies a fix. Not always, though. He's not addicted, otherwise he'd be doing it all the time. Recently he's got a girlfriend. Her name's Lexi, and she's got brown hair which she flicks when she laughs. Things got a lot more interesting when she came on the scene, just last week they had sex in his car when it was parked in the field around O'Coys farm. I was in the back. I know that sounds weird, but he wouldn't care, and anyway it's really boring being me. Everything's dull, even the bright yellow bumble bee on Rosie's favourite bib looks dirty now, like the scum you get on top of gone-off milk.

I guess you could say I'm apathetic.

Working up enthusiasm is hard when you're dead. I just don't see the point.

It's got its perks, though. I can hear people's thoughts, kind of. Not all of them, but snatches. Like the occasional rush of noise you get between the static when tuning in to short wave radio. I just... hear them. Sometimes they're images, and I see them. Some people are easier to pick up on than others.

I like sitting by Rosie the most when I start to worry that I'm forgetting things. There's so much that I think about now, that I never cared about when I was alive. The soft texture of grass on the tips of my fingers. The way that you have to peel off your clothes when you've been caught outside in rain. The way the skin on your arms itches if you've been sitting in the sun for too long. Rosie's hand on my face, stroking my cheek, and the sting from her innocently poked finger in my eye to feel how wet it is.

My name. James. It's James.

James.

Sorry, I've gone off again. Rosie. I like sitting by Rosie. Everything is new to her, exciting. Life is a challenge, and a one year old isn't satisfied until they have prodded, scratched, stroked and grabbed every part of it. I see her delight in the flickering of her thoughts; images only at the moment, she can't talk yet. She keeps me from forgetting myself. What it's like. Where I came from.

That's how I found out how I died. Through people's thoughts, I mean. Donny's mainly. He discovered my body, so his snatches are the clearest.

A body, mine, squashed up under the ice.

Oh my god. Oh shit, oh shit. James! JAMES! Oh fuck oh fuck what do I do I don't know oh god oh god oh shit oh god.

An ambulance.

Police buzzing like flies, looking grave and important.

The stiffness of the limbs when they finally cut through and pulled the body out.

The eyes, mine, vacantly green and still open.

Hearing Donny and seeing what he saw jarred a few shadowy memories of my own. The pounding in my temples from my accelerated heartbeat. My eyes stinging from the salt in the water. How smooth the ice was as my hands pushed upon it, slippery and frozen.

Mostly it is the cold that I remember. The way it encroached upon my skin, rudely, intrusively. The way it possessed me. I could feel it in my head, gripping me, in my lungs,

shutting them down. It weighed me down so that my thrashing arms became weak and lifeless. I drifted.

Prompt: This piece is a combination of a monologue and character building exercise we tried in the workshop, and also the exercise involving thinking of an opening first line for a piece of writing and progressing from that point. Ideally I'd like this to be seen as an extract from a longer story.

Editing Commentary on 'Damage'

This piece was inspired by the various 'show, don't tell' exercises in class fairly early on into the module. At first I found that I often struggled for inspiration during the timed writing exercises; perhaps it was because, even now, I am quite a self-conscious writer and tend to be more 'B' side orientated. When I'd write a paragraph or two of heavily edited work, I'd notice others around me on their second page. This was a bit off-putting. Although this became less of a problem for me as the module progressed, and my confidence in my own ability increased, this particular piece was started out of class. It uses the general ideas of 'showing' from our class discussions.

My first draft began rather awkwardly. I knew I had a rough idea of wanting to describe the victim of an accident in a hospital bed, yet found that I struggled to begin in the 'showing' style. As a result I ended up overwhelming the reader with a whole paragraph of contextual information, giving the beginning of the piece a somewhat clichéd and unrealistic feel. I effectively told the reader what to expect in the upcoming story, a point which rightly concerned my peers. My classmates also pointed out that as a narrator I was seemed to be stepping into the story itself in the last line of the first paragraph. This is something I really wanted to avoid, as I know from my own experience of a reader that narrators can often come across as self-important if they interfere too much with a story by speaking directly to the reader. Following their advice and my own gut feeling towards the beginning of the piece, I subsequently decided to cut the whole of the opening paragraph in the final draft. I feel the piece is much improved as a result.

Despite the shaky beginning, I found that once I became more comfortable with the direction of the story, the 'showing' technique came to me fairly easily. In the first draft I didn't give away too much about the man, but I liked the idea of nerve damage and the physical and emotional affects this may have on a person. The idea of a surgeon's life, particularly, being destroyed through the loss of sensation in his hands was something I found conceptually intriguing, as so often in life we take our hands and senses for granted. I decided to develop this, playing on the senses of sight and touch particularly in the second and final drafts. This was partially inspired by one of my favourite novels as a teenager, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which the loss of personhood and deprivation of the senses lends itself to some beautiful imagery. I attempted to recreate this in 'Damage', particularly when the man remembers the various sensations from the picnic with his ex-wife. To make the 'showing' part of the story more vivid, I tried to choose unusual images, such as the 'crinkly sharpness of tin foil'.

I enjoyed the limitless imagery that could be created by the 'show, don't tell' technique. Having a style of writing that is often dominated by my 'lyre' side, I particularly liked creating the colourful description of the man's bruising, although I realise this was a bit overdone in the second draft. Following these concerns from my class group, I toned this down slightly by removing some unnecessary adjectives, and trusted the image of the 'patchwork' of his bruises to be strong enough to stand alone.

Although like most people in the module I was reluctant at first to show my writing to others in the group, I eventually found myself *wanting* to read my work to these new friends. The advice I gained from their various inputs, particularly with regard to this piece, was invaluable. Without their helpful suggestions the piece would have probably remained rather

unexplained and abrupt, and the precious insight into the man's 'damaged' life after the accident would have remained undeveloped entirely. They also suggested subtly expanding the character of the woman in the piece by adding the odd telling detail here and there, as well as removing the dumped information about the two characters' divorce completely. A careful reader will hopefully pick up on the drip-fed behavioural and personal details about the woman which subtly shapes the understanding of her character; for example, the woman's concern for her appearance which is shown in the 'elegant sweep of her hand' and her neat handwriting, and the sense of awkwardness and estrangement that exists between her and the man.

Overall, I am very happy with the final piece, and believe that on the whole I have achieved my goal of producing a descriptively rich piece which 'shows' and doesn't just 'tell'.

Damage – draft 1

He didn't quite remember how it happened. Like all accidents, it had smashed as quickly in and out of his life like a flash flood, leaving unchangeable destruction in its wake. He pretended to blame the lawyer from the divorce case; if it wasn't for her phone call, he'd have never had picked the damn thing up and none of what had followed would have happened. Inwardly, though, he loathed himself. There is something bitterly amazing in the realisation that you are the one responsible for the pain you're now feeling. The emptiness that follows. The self-disgust. The fake smile.

He lay solemnly in the bed, unmoving. His skin was beautifully patchworked with earthy browns, yellows, greens and plumbs, merging seamlessly together to hide all shades of peach. Sporadically criss-crossed on his arms, legs and one cheek were bright gashes of red, like chillies scattered across his skin, making the patchwork magnificent in colour and texture. Taped on his torso was a white gauze pad, covering the more impressive purples, which surrounded a large area of raw skin pulled taut by neat blue stitching. He was not motionless through choice, but necessity.

Another such padded square was taped to the side of his head, extending down to cover his right eye. His uncovered eye was half open. A quiet click to his left made it dart in that direction, falling upon a woman in her thirties who was crying. He looked away. Falteringly, the woman approached the bed. She was holding an envelope in her hands with his name printed on it. He did not look at her, but continued to stare at the blank wall opposite and the blank television screen.

"I don't know what to say" the woman said. She wiped her eyes. He lay quite still. "Please look at me," she said, her voice unusually high pitched and shrill. "I..." she stopped, her eyes raking his face. Slowly, he turned to meet his gaze to hers. "I'm so sorry". She tried again, forcing a smile and an overly-cheerful tone. "Well, the nurse said you're comfortable – "

"Tell me"

She swallowed heavily, and fiddled with the envelope.

"I don't- "

"Tell me," his voice was flat, dead.

"Impaired use of your left eye and...and nerve damage to both of your hands."

He looked away. She laughed awkwardly, and shifted her weight.

"Please leave"

She looked pale, and as though she had been slapped. She took a step backwards, and composed her face. "Yes, yes, well I guess you'll need some time for it to sink in... I mean, the good thing is you're alive... and if you think about it, that...rather than...well. I, er, I've got your ring here... they had to take it off for surgery. I didn't know you still wore it. Well... it's probably not the best time. I'll just be going then."

She placed the envelope gently on the table beside him. "I'm sorry".

He heard the click of the door, and knew she'd gone. It wasn't until then that he allowed the tear to fall slowly from his right eye and dry upon his face.

Damage – draft 2

He didn't quite remember how it happened. He pretended to blame the lawyer from the divorce case; if it wasn't for her phone call, he'd have never had picked the damn thing up and none of what had followed would have happened. Inwardly, though, he loathed himself.

He lay solemnly in the bed, unmoving. His skin was beautifully patchworked with earthy browns, acid yellows, grassy greens and deep plumbs, merging seamlessly together to hide all shades of peach. Sporadically criss-crossed on his arms, legs and one cheek were bright gashes of red, like chillies scattered across his skin, making the patchwork magnificent in colour and texture. Taped on his torso was a white gauze pad, covering the more impressive stormy purples, which surrounded a large area of raw skin pulled taut by neat blue stitching. Another such padded square was taped to the side of his head, extending down to cover his right eye. He was not motionless through choice, but necessity.

His uncovered eye was half open. A quiet click to his left made it dart in that direction, falling upon a blonde woman in her thirties who was crying. He looked away. Falteringly, the woman approached the bed. She was holding an envelope in her hands with his name written on it in carefully printed script. He did not look at her, but continued to stare at the blank wall opposite and the blank television screen.

"I don't know what to say" the woman said. She wiped her eyes with an elegant sweep. He lay quite still.

"Please look at me," she said, her voice unusually shrill. "I..." she stopped, her eyes raking his face. Slowly, he turned to meet his gaze to hers. "I'm so sorry, I—" she cut herself off, forcing a smile and a cheerful tone. She tried again. "Well, the nurse said you're comfortable and —"

"Tell me"

She swallowed heavily, and fiddled with the envelope.

"I don't- "

"Tell me," his voice was flat, dead.

"Impaired use of your left eye and...and nerve damage to both of your hands."

He looked away. She laughed awkwardly, and shifted her weight. "You never could get away from work could you! I would've thought you'd be sick of this place by now, being a surgeon and all... all the scalpels and disinfectant."

"Please leave"

She looked pale, and as though she had been slapped. She took a step backwards, and composed her face. "Yes, yes, well I guess you'll need some time for it to sink in... I mean, the good thing is you're still here... and if you think about it, that...rather than...well. I, er, I've got your ring here... they had to take it off for surgery. I didn't know you still wore it. Well... it's probably not the best time. I'll just be going then."

She placed the envelope gently on the table beside him. "I'm sorry".

He heard the click of the door, and knew she'd gone. It wasn't until then that he allowed the tear to fall slowly from his right eye and dry upon his face.

It took him a long time to learn how to re-live, at first. The eye healed well, and he'd been left with moderate but somewhat blinkered vision from it. His hands,

however, were harder to adjust to. Almost impossible at first. He often lay awake at night, dwelling on the things he could no longer do, and the sense of touch he'd lost. His mind lingered on the feel of his ex-wife's hair. The sureness of it all. Now, his hands were unpredictable. At times they'd do his bidding, and at others they'd flatly ignore his brain's messages. He went back to the hospital about a year after it happened, to collect the photographs in his office. The sign on the door welcomed him with shiny familiarity. *Dr. Austen, Open-Heart Surgeon*. The blinds on his windows were drawn, making the room dull and shadowy. He felt unwelcome. Hurriedly, he arranged the objects that had defined his life for the past sixteen years into two boxes, and left the room. The door closed with a smart click behind him. He left the sign. Hesitating, he walked up the corridor, passing familiar doors and signs. At a pair of double doors, he stopped. He put the boxes down, and pushed the doors gently open, knowing how they'd feel.

The room was unchanged. Shiny surfaces surrounded a large operating table, and to the side was a scrubs room. He smiled, in relief. This had not changed, at least. He ran his fingers down the smooth surface of the operating table. His fingers did not fumble though they lacked sensation. He bent down and placed his cheek on the metal. It was cold. Frictionless. What a relief.

Damage

He lay solemnly in the white bed, unmoving. His skin was beautifully patchworked with earthy browns, yellows, greens and deep plumbs, merging seamlessly together to hide all shades of peach. Sporadically criss-crossed on his arms, legs and one cheek were bright gashes of red, like chillies scattered across his skin, making the patchwork magnificent in colour and texture. Taped to his torso was a white gauze pad, covering the more impressive stormy purples which surrounded an area of raw skin, pulled taut by neat blue stitching. Another padded square was taped to the side of his head, extending down to cover his right eye.

He was not motionless through choice, but necessity. His uncovered eye lay half open, heavy with self pity rather than swollen skin. A quiet click to his left caused it to dart in the same direction, falling upon a blonde woman in her thirties who was crying.

He looked away.

Falteringly, the woman approached the bed. Within her rigid fingers she was clutching an envelope with his name written on it in carefully printed script. He did not look at her, but stared straight ahead at the white wall opposite, and at the blank television screen with its little red light in the bottom corner.

A moment of silence. "I don't know what to say" the woman said. She wiped her eyes with an elegant sweep. He lay quite still.

"Please look at me" she said, her voice unusually shrill, "I..." she trailed off, her eyes raking his face.

Slowly, he returned his gaze to meet hers.

"I'm so sorry, I –" she cut herself off, forcing a smile. She tried again. "Well, the nurse said you're comfortable and –"

"Tell me" he said. His voice was a raspy scratch. It sounded flat. Dead. It didn't sound like him. She swallowed heavily, and fiddled with the envelope.

"I don't –"

"Tell me."

She looked at the floor. "Impaired use of your left eye and... and... nerve damage to both hands." It came out in a rush, but he heard it.

He looked away.

She inhaled quickly, as if to say something, but stopped herself again. She laughed awkwardly, and shifted her weight. "You never could get away from work could you! I would've thought you'd be sick of this place by now, being a surgeon... all the... all the scalpels and disinfectant."

"Please leave."

She blinked, looking pale and as though she'd been slapped. After a moment she took a step backwards, composing her face.

"Yes. Yes, yes I guess you'll need some time to – for it to sink in, I mean. The – the good thing is you're still here... and, and if you think about that rather than – well you know, it's... I er, I've got... it's your ring here... they had to take it off for surgery. I didn't know you still wore it... It's probably not the – the best time..." she trailed off. He sighed in impatience.

"I'll... I'll just be going, then."

She placed the envelope gently on the table beside him.

"Bye, then... I'm sorry."

He heard the click of the door, and knew she'd gone. It wasn't until then that he allowed the tear to fall slowly from his working eye, and dry upon his face.

It took him a long time to learn how to live. The eye healed well and he'd been left with moderate but somewhat blinkered vision from it. He often lay awake at night, silent in the darkness, dwelling on the things he could no longer do and the sense of touch he'd lost.

At times, the rage felt almost physical, rotting in his stomach and splintering outwards, upwards, rising into his chest until the pain of it *became* physical, when he eventually realised his clawed hands had been ripping shreds in his skin.

Sometimes he simply lay in quiet grief. His mind lingered on the feel of his ex-wife's hair, and sun-dappled picnics in their garden. The crinkly sharpness of wrapping tin foil around left over food. The slight roughness of turning the pages of a book. His smooth-fingered confidence when he fixed people and stitched them back together.

The sureness of it all.

He went back to the hospital about a year after it happened to collect the photographs and plaques from his office. The sign on the door welcomed him with a shiny familiarity. The blinds of his windows were drawn, making the room dull and shadowy. He felt unwelcome. Hurriedly, he arranged the objects that had defined his life for the past sixteen years into two boxes and left the room, closing the door with a smart click behind him.

He left the sign on the door.

Hesitatingly he walked up the brightly lit corridor, passing familiar doors and directions and stopping at a pair of stainless steel double doors with round windows. He placed the boxes on the floor and pushed the doors gently open, knowing how they'd feel; cold, clean.

The room was unchanged. Shiny silver surfaces surrounded a large operating table, complete with big overhead circular lights. To the side stood a smaller connecting scrubs room, with deep silver sinks attached to the wall.

He smiled.

Calmly crossing the room, he ran his hand down the smooth surface of the operating table, as tenderly as a man tracing the contours of a woman's back. His fingers did not fumble though they lacked sensation. He bent down and placed his cheek gently on the bright metal. It felt cold. Frictionless. Tranquil. He smiled, in relief.

Reflective Commentary

From as early as I can remember, I've always had problems with sleeping. Even when I was a few days old, apparently I'd fidgeted around so much during a midwife's visit that she turned to my poor Mum and said very matter-of-factly "Well, you're going to have trouble with this one". She was right; I was a nightly nuisance to my parents throughout my childhood and to this day I find getting to sleep and staying asleep a constant challenge. If I'm honest, I think this is where my love of reading came from. I'd be awake so often, and so early every morning, that picking up a book became almost second nature to me. Whilst the rest of my family were still asleep I'd be poring over Danielle Steel – yes, I hate to admit it, but at ten years old I loved those trashy books – the dark genius of Roald Dahl, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Goosebumps and Point Horror. As I got older I ranged widely, from Jane Austen, Shakespeare, Bram Stoker, Charles Baudelaire, Margaret Atwood, Wilfred Owen, TS Eliot, Stephen King (I still like the occasional trash), Phillip Pullman, Samuel Beckett, Danielewski...and the odd philosophical doctrine by Descartes or David Lewis. I have developed an eclectic taste for anything that particularly provokes my mind into scrutinising every line for clever imagery, plays on words and double meaning – as well as revelling in work that makes the reader a little uncomfortable.

I've always enjoyed writing, although it shames me to admit that before choosing to take this module, the last time I wrote so frequently was as a child. I went through stages of writing nothing but certain types of story; Victorian fiction about maids and grand houses featured predominantly at one point, as did fantasy stories about wolves. When I was in primary school, I remember handing in an extract of a story project we had been given. My story was called 'Summer Camp' (I still have it) and it was about a brother and a sister who were terrorised during a camp holiday by a ghost who could only survive by killing all of the camp's members. I guess you could say I had an active imagination. My problem was never that I didn't want to sleep; it was that I could never quite switch off. I still can't. I'm a thinker. I go over and over things – novels, films, events that have happened or are happening in my life – analysing them, dwelling on them and teasing out all possible meanings of them.

I took this module so that I could write again. After so many years of neglect, I thought my creative writing ability had all but left me. My moments of sudden inspiration and urges to get scribbling had become fewer and fewer during my late teens. When I did sit down with the purposeful aim of being creative, often nothing would come. Typically, I'd over-think anything that I wrote, to the extent that I was dissatisfied with everything. I'd end up drawing a blank. By taking this module, I wanted to tap into the positive aspect of the analytical part of myself rather than be held back by it; the side that made me such a free and frequent writer during my youth. When choosing my English modules, I realised that if I didn't prove to myself that I could still write creatively by taking Creative Writing, my inner-critic would always hold me back. I didn't want to put off doing something that I so enjoyed as a child because I was too scared of finding out that I couldn't do it anymore.

The ironic thing was that everybody thought they had little to no talent. In our first workshop, Robbie asked us to write down that which we thought we had more of; self-doubt or self-belief. Every single person in the room wrote 'self-doubt'. I knew then that I'd made the right decision in taking the module. However much or little experience each of us had, we all believed that we weren't very good. That, somehow, good writers just *are* good; you either have the talent or you don't, you don't progress or develop or have bad days. I now know how ridiculous this belief was.

At first I found myself staying fairly silent in workshops, which annoys me about other people in seminars for other modules. Once I realised how hypocritical this was, and the fact that everyone was somewhat shy, I determined to speak up more and be confident in asserting my opinions on pieces of writing that we were studying, or what I thought about certain writing styles, for example. Robbie Dewa encouraged our opinions, but did not pick on people if they preferred to be more passive. This held true for reading our own work aloud, and I think it is vital for any module of this kind. I think that a large aspect of creative writing is confidence, and Robbie gave just enough encouragement to allow us the freedom to develop this at our own pace. The timed writing exercises really helped this; the immediacy of having writing from your own hand at the end of a timed exercise gives you a push of confidence that you can, in fact, write – even if what you have written you will later either disregard or rework. Personally, I struggled with the timed exercises at first, although it did become easier for me as the module progressed. In the past I only ever wrote when I felt inspired to, yet Robbie impelled us to just write and see what came. The self-critical aspect of my personality perhaps explains why I am predominantly a ‘B’ style writer; often I was keenly aware of only having written half a page while others around me jotted away. Though this still occasionally concerned me later on in the module, I found these exercises refreshing and often they triggered ideas and images within me which would have never just come to me on a passing whim of inspiration.

Similarly my confidence grew with sharing work and reading my own work aloud, as well as giving my own insight into others’ work. I enjoyed receiving both teacher and peer opinions on my writing, and found their points of view very valuable when I read over and rewrote various pieces. A compliment I received several times was that I balance showing and telling the reader well; ‘The Aircraft’, ‘The Accident’ and ‘Damage’ are examples of this. It was intriguing to listen to the different directions people had taken in some of the writing exercises, giving fascinatingly varied perspectives and ideas on the same topic – many of which had not even crossed my mind. A notable example of this was when Robbie asked us to write from the sentence ‘Caroline knew that James was their father’s favourite’. Whilst my story revolved around a motoring accident that had killed James, Lizzie’s focused on child sex abuse, and Emma’s on sibling rivalry. Indeed, I appreciated the exercises in which Robbie suggested starting points, such as specific sentences, themes or styles. As I writer, I find the initial forming of subject-matter ideas somewhat difficult.

I found that I really enjoyed flash fiction, a style that I had not encountered before embarking upon the module. Raymond Carver’s technique of ‘stripped’ writing especially appealed to me, as it required careful consideration of each word. I think that the ‘B’ writers in class would agree with me about this point. I like the sense of detachment that can be created through the external perspective, as well as the sense of ‘Scene’ dialogue created here which gives the piece a play script like feel. I think my own attempt at this, ‘Lunchtime at the Coffee Shop’, achieves this well.

I took pleasure in studying different forms and structures of poetry in the module. During my late teens I discovered Wilfred Owen, and to this day he remains one of my favourite poets. I am always extremely moved when reading his poetry, and the poignancy of the images he creates. In my experimentation with different points of view, I have drawn on military themes through his influence – for example, ‘The Officer’ and ‘Just’, a poem with a double-meaning title and the note form of William Carlos Williams. With the exception of these two poems, my poetry in general tends to be drawn from my own experience. I enjoy creating abstract

pieces which need to be analysed in order to be fully understood; 'How to Pretend' is an example of this. I drew inspiration from another of my favourite poets, TS Eliot, for the 'loose' structuring of this poem and also 'How to Watch'. I find that, as a reader, poems with a set form and structure tend to lose my interest fairly quickly; I am much more a fan of half-rhymes and lines which run into one another. My attempt at writing poetry in form was awkward. Although I found the haiku form fairly easy to follow, the sonnet form which I originally attempted in 'David' I eventually abandoned in favour of a looser structure and rhyming scheme. I think the end product is a simple, but moving, poem. 'David' and 'How to Pretend' are particularly personal poems for me, but I'm okay with this. I think many of the best creative works are drawn from personal experience, even if in some cases the link is a small one.

My experience of monologue was progressive. I found an exercise in which we pictured a person sitting on a park bench and then wrote from 'inside their head', very difficult. I think this is because, as a writer, I have always tended to avoid first person narrative. Despite this I am glad that I persevered through encouragement from Robbie to try new methods of writing. I ended up trying monologue writing several times outside of the classroom, and found that it became easier if I allowed my 'drum' side to dominate over my 'lyre' side. The need for lyrical description often marred my ability to retain the focus needed for the first person narrative. Once I had realised this, I also found that I could transgress my 'B' style writing to more of a free flowing 'A' style. The result was 'Donny and Stretcho'. Although I am happy with this piece, I am still not fully satisfied and feel that it would work better as a longer story. I plan to develop this piece of writing in the future; I have the idea that it was Donny that killed Stretcho and that Stretcho eventually realises that he was betrayed by his best friend through piecing together the images and thoughts of characters around him. It is a work in progress.

When examining most pieces of writing that I have produced for this module, I have noticed several key themes which emerge and recur. These include physical and emotional trauma or loss, events which promote a life-changing crisis, and often allusions to death or violence. A technique I also tend to play with is making the reader feel somewhat unsettled. If I am honest, I think these recurring themes are a result of several key events in my own life, as well as coming from my personal tastes in novels – even back from when, as a child, I enjoyed horror fiction. My aim is to provoke an unsettled or uncomfortable or deep-thinking reaction, and this is what I search for in creative works that I read.

As a writer, I know I still have quite a way to go. There are things that I know I can improve, such as allowing myself to be less self-conscious and be more confident in my ability. It is only when I look back at myself before taking this module that I realise how far I have come. I started off with the timid hope that I could recapture the enjoyment of writing that I once had as a child. As the module has progressed, not only have I achieved this goal, I have developed my own style and written using techniques and themes that I never had encountered or thought of before. I am still learning, developing and practising as often as I can, and I certainly plan to keep writing creatively in my spare time in the future. This module has filled me with a long-forgotten enthusiasm for writing, and the knowledge that I am capable of continual growth and development. That is the most important thing that I have gained from it, and for that I am very pleased that I decided to take it.