

# THE POETICS OF PROFANITY

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In my capacity as a practising writer and teacher, I have over the last few years been actively involved in the design and administration of an intensive writing program for traumatised Australian servicemen and women, all of whom have served overseas in various deployments. This program, which involves immersive work with a small group for a month of 6- to 8-hour days, has consistently challenged my preconceptions about the people involved: the diversity of their attitudes to nationalism, politics, government, philosophy, education, creativity, family and myriad other social and cultural forces was (for me, at least) both unexpected and powerful.

This diversity of ideologies and opinion, however, rests upon a common understanding of several of their shared identities: as members of the defence forces; as members of a community of service; as protectors; as Australians who have served their country; and as survivors of trauma.

One thing that has consistently struck me throughout this process is the language of trauma that often — but not always — evinces itself in expressing this latter identity. The use of profanity in informal situations (and almost never in public or official capacities) is a regular occurrence. It struck me, though, that in many instances profanity was not being used as a linguistic device to gain or express power over someone, but rather as a poetic device — often used with to achieve a darkly comic effect — as a way of expressing the inexpressible. Through drawing upon the social taboo of publicly-expressed profanity as a way to mirror the inexpressibility of trauma, profanity becomes a means of giving context to the impact of trauma upon the formation of identity, and thus becomes a step in the recovery and resilience-building process.

In this piece, I attempt to explore this idea in a short narrative, where the use of profanity is approached from a poetic standpoint, as a means of allowing my protagonist to give voice to the ongoing management of his trauma, within the context of his domestic setting.

A strong language warning applies to this piece of writing.

## Out

Dawn slides its grimy fingers between the slatted venetians, and Terry Anderson rolls over in bed, the ache of a soft, morning, piss-fuelled erection tugging at his groin.

‘Jesus!’

Sandpaper voice scrapes against sandpaper throat and only the muted grumble of the Pacific, just a couple of hundred metres away, offers any reply.

Rose has gone. Lipstick and the smell of her lingering, like echoes of a scream.

‘Fuck’, Anderson mutters.

He'd like to sleep some more. Sleep the whole fucking day away, if it was possible, but the pressure in his bladder is insistent and the fucking sulphur-crested cockatoos are screaming their fucking tits off outside and so, with a grunt, Anderson rolls sideways out of bed. His rising is heralded by the ringing clatter of empty bottles kicked across sticky floorboards.

'Fucker.'

It's a statement, not a curse.

Fucking Rose has moved his fucking leg again and for a few moments he casts around for it, one hand steadying himself on the bedpost, an absurd sight with his half-master, like an obscene, aroused, albino flamingo.

She's put it in the wastepaper basket by his desk. There's a note attached. *You were so legless last nite I didnt think youd need it any more luv rose.* Very fucking funny.

He leaves it where it is, for the moment. Hops to the bathroom. Sits down to piss. Womanly. *In touch with my fucking feminine side, whether I like it or not.* The sound of his stream on the porcelain echoes around the tiled room and sets his head pounding. Somewhere nearby he knows there's Panadol. A lot of fucking use it'll be to him, but what the hell. *Better than a kick in the nuts,* he thinks. Having drained himself, he grabs the stainless cripple-bar, hauls himself to his foot and dives into the plastic bag kept under the sink.

No Panadol.

Every other fucking thing, though.

Teldane, Telfast, Rectinol, Valium, men's multivitamins, some probably-illegal-herbal-virility-shit he brought back from Thailand three years ago, a small, forgotten bag of dope, a handful of left over Vicodin and a half empty packet of Imodium.

'Fuck!'

Anderson chucks the bag under the sink again, hops back out to the bedroom and thinks for a minute before crossing to the window and tearing the venetians aside.

'SHUT THE FUCK UP! ', he screams at the sulphurs, which in turn pay him not the slightest bit of attention. Down the hill, between the trunks of the stringybarks that dot the sandy slope of the block, the ocean glimmers; brooding blue, leafed with silver. Sunrise over sea.

The leg, retrieved from the bin, fits as it should. Snug against the callouses on his stump, which are long thickened against the constant grind of Kevlar and plastic. Straps wrap around, one, then two. Tighten. Grip.

Mobile.

A huntsman has webbed up the space in the porch roof, immediately overhead the steps. Anderson wipes it down with a single, irritable sweep.

'Fuck.'

The sand is still cold underfoot and Hamlet is waiting, tail wagging spastically, at the gate. Tries to jump up and gets a sharp crack on the nose for his efforts.

‘Gerrof, you stupid fucking animal!’

Jesus. What was she thinking? A fucking Labrador, of all things. When Rose brought it around he’d just looked at her.

‘I’m a fucking cripple. Not fucking blind.’

Rose didn’t give a shit, though. No surprises there.

Hamlet in tow, Karl lurches down towards the beach. Usually the sand doesn’t pose a problem, but this morning, for some reason, he’s rolling like a pig in shit.

‘Fuck.’

At the tree-line, the vague dappled shade gives way to the narrow strip of beach that curves between the headlands. The white sand is blinding in the morning light and within three or four steps his good ankle twists under him slightly and he goes sprawling, much to Hamlet’s delight.

‘Ah, Christ.’

After a moment of wrestling the dog away, Terry gives up. Rolls sideways. Unstraps his leg and leaves it on his towel. Slides off his pants. Shirt, too. No bluebottles on the beach this morning, so he should be okay to go in skinny. He always checks, though. Once he got whacked right across the old fella. Fuck, that had hurt. Worse than his leg, in some ways. And then he’d had to dip the bastard in vinegar, which wasn’t very fucking pleasant, either.

There’s no swell — not that it makes much difference in the bay. One of the reasons he bought the place. A gentle sweep of water hisses up and then down, painting the sand briefly before slipping back out again.

At water’s edge the cold grips his ankle like a fist, raising gooseflesh. He doesn’t hesitate. Two more big hops, then dives. Shallow, skimming flat into the surface of the water. No point breaking his neck as well. Two, three strokes, and the sandbank shelves away, the excited turbulence of water’s edge quickly giving way to the weed-strewn seabed, several metres down.

It’s clear this morning. A school of garfish dart flickering across the sand, wheeling in uncanny unison as his dark shadow passes over. Terry drops into his usual, strong crawl. Hands cupped loosely, arms curling out of the water rhythmically, thumbs aligned mid-thigh on exit, elbows leading up. Then out, reaching, stretching. Feeling the length of the stroke in his intercostals, then scooping. Pulling, pushing the water past. Face down, buried through the next stroke.

Out.

Away from the beach. From the house. Floating in glorious weightlessness. Unencumbered by gravity, his absent leg, or any other prick, for that matter.

In the paper the other day he’d read about some millionaire yank. Twelve million US dollars this bastard was paying for ten days on the International Space Station. Wanker. If he wanted to float, he should just come here. Terry would have let him use the bay for half that.

The bay gets deeper. Darker. To his left he's drawing slowly even with Gaardner's Head. The sun glints off the roof of McPherson's place, high up on the headland, sprawled indolent between the Norfolks. He wonders if Del is up there at the moment. Gazing out of those panoramic windows with their 270-degree views. Looking down into the bay and watching him. He rolls onto his back and sticks his dick up out of the water as high as he can. The world's limpest periscope. Just in case.

Floating.

At the mouth of the bay, the bottom shelves up briefly again, to within three or four metres of the surface, causing the waves to hummock up and down. On a big day they'll often break across here, but today they're just lurching against the seafloor like a humping poodle. As Anderson powers over the reef, bile rises in his throat and his stomach empties itself in a scotch-flavoured spurt.

*Fuck, that feels better.*

In open water now, he doesn't hesitate, but swims on. Out. Around him the sea pulls and tugs, the current running north-south and trying to drift him down towards Tallaga, but he angles slightly against it, swimming straight out into the Pacific for perhaps another twenty minutes or so before he stops and floats.

*One day. One fucking day I'll just keep going.*

Not today though.

From this far out the coast is shrinking, the continent withdrawing into itself, retreating from the unblinking ocean horizon and turning its gaze inwards. The rocky headlands in the national park are shrunken, the scrub inland already fading into salt-mist. Terry Anderson turns his back on it all. Rolls in the water, faces east. Faces the void.

Floating.

For several minutes, while his breathing returns to normal, his arms and leg push gently, effortlessly, against the edging current, exerting just enough energy to keep himself in position. Out here he's whole again. Just for a few moments. Whole and free. Fucking ironic that, given that the fucking animal that bit his fucking leg off in the first place is also somewhere out here, probably swimming along happily.

*Fuck this for symbolism, he thinks. I hope the fucking Japs got it and turned it into that god-awful stiffer soup of theirs.*

Flipping in the water, Terry Anderson hits out towards the shore. Towards his beach. He doesn't even glance back at that empty horizon behind him. He isn't sure he'd be able to stop himself trying to reach it if he did.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anthony Eaton is an associate professor of creative writing at the University of Canberra. He has written eleven novels for a wide range of readerships, has twice won the honour book award in the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Prize, and twice won the Western Australian Premier's

Book Award for young adult fiction. He is editor of the journal *Papers: Explorations into Children's Literature*, and his research interests include the application of creative practice in trauma management, and contemporary shifts in the conception of young adulthood as expressed in fiction for that readership.