

The prism of darkness: writing fear and pain

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In my mid-twenties, at the behest of inflated dreams and fears, I abandoned nearly everything significant in my life to set off on a global journey without a defined end. Among the things of my life that I was leaving were a coveted job as a newspaper journalist; an unfinished course of therapy for an illness I'd just been diagnosed with – one of the world's most embarrassing, obsessive compulsive disorder; and a wise and tender girlfriend, about whom I had a fear of commitment that was partially obsessive-compulsive and partially post-Catholic-neurotic.

Misadventures ensued across the world, from Fiji to northern Alaska, and from southern Bolivia to Zimbabwe. I also had many awe-inspiring and some semi-transcendent experiences that made it seem in many ways I was entering the 'flow of life' I'd left everything to seek. But the love I was fleeing was not fading, and the mental illness I couldn't accept could only be mastered through acceptance; and I eventually faced losing everything unless I could break through my illusions and get back to Australia and the love I'd rashly spurned before it was lost and I was last heard of rapidly going mad in Zimbabwe.

Of the varieties mentioned above, the darkness I want to talk today about is the dark loop of obsessive compulsive disorder.

One of the things I wanted to do in *Exposure* was to humanise OCD, this most alien-seeming and outlandish of illnesses. And since that involved me in narrating the genesis of the illness, I included narrative guesses as to why I developed OCD. For example, *Exposure* describes how when I was three months old my mother fell seriously ill – the first of many such episodes – and disappeared into hospital for a year, leaving me to be bottle-nursed on the deliberately bared chest of my concerned father. My father, despite his good psychoanalytic intentions, may have somewhat confused me there. He had a beard, after all. The book also describes the darkening effect that occurred in my teens when my parents, both of them extremely persuasive

Catholic academics, began informing me what might happen if I had premarital sex.

I wish I was being flippant or exaggerating there. In fact, in the early 1980s my mother was Adelaide's most sought-after Catholic sexual educators. She was famous, and we were proud of her. She would get invites from the best Catholic schools to go and give sexy talks to teenagers convincing them not to have sex. Exposed at close range to this powerful rhetoric, I became convinced that my orgasms would be ruined forever – which seemed as bad to me as my father's equivalent threat of going to hell forever – if I had sex with anyone one than the One, who my mother said would give me the sacredly explosive orgasms God had intended them to be. For a 14-year-old contemplating such a catastrophic loss, 'The world', as I put it in *Exposure*, 'seemed to go dark at the idea'.

Incidentally, I should note that I love my parents to bits, and all I can really accuse them of is taking their Catholicism seriously.

At all events, whatever the true cause, I became a fearful and extremely girl averse teenager. And as a young adult, under the provocation of the stresses of overseas travel, my fears became so intense they cracked me, as darkness of another kind came rushing in.

I'd been in Scotland's remote Orkney islands on a short solo trip taken out of a longer backpacking tour with a woman I'd finally fell for at 18. It was a strange sound that brought the darkness in: a sound I'd heard from outside a stone hut I'd reached after a scary walk on a rainy night across the tiny island of Hoy. It was a low 'euh', and it didn't even sound much like a human voice, but as I lay in the hut I experienced an intense fear that a lost hiker had stumbled past the hut and was in trouble, and I began feeling powerful, repetitive urges to go outside and walk around the hut calling out for the man, which I did, twice. The next morning I thought I'd finally managed to forget my lost hiker:

On a stone wall near my very own Scottish bothy I munched on some muesli, happily contemplating the place where I'd write and think and be at peace for a week, the place I was determined to enjoy. I put a spoonful of muesli into my mouth, and the ice-cold fingers of a ghost pressed into my gut.

He could have been injured already – before blundering past the bothy.

The dread-filled pressure rose once more in my chest; my mind darkened. I tried to reassure myself I was being ridiculous: this supposed individual never even existed.

You don't know that. He could be lying somewhere out there right now – dying!

The Rackwick valley had disappeared; and now a hot-and-cold sourness, an acidic liquid pain mixed from adrenaline and something else, began slicing its way up and down my limbs, and my mind became so dark and panic-stricken I could no longer tell what was ridiculous and what wasn't. All I knew was that the pain would stop if I obeyed the urge now pressing not just in my chest but in every part of my body – the urge to check there was no man by doing a wider, comprehensive search in daylight. And so, incredulous and frantic, I left my breakfast on the stone wall and began what I assured myself would be definitely my last look for this improbable man.

After a broad, systematic sweep I sat back on the stone wall, body wracked, picked up my abandoned bowl of muesli, and once again looked out at the beauty of the valley and its winding stream. I took a mouthful, descending cascades of relief.

Thank God. No man.

The stream. He could have fallen in ...

By the time two days had passed I was spending most of my daylight hours searching. Then I began going out at night to check lights in the valley. And three days later, when I'd escaped the Orkneys and begun hitching down the western coast of Scotland:

I was only able to let the lost man go by ringing the Orkney police and reporting I'd heard an 'euh' on the island of Hoy.

More OCD episodes occurred on that early trip, and when I was 23 and on a journalistic junket to Hong Kong I fell prey to a much more debilitating, much longer-lasting episode. Finally I went and got diagnosed by a psychologist, but though I gave lip service to accepting the diagnosis and did much of the 'exposure therapy', at 25 OCD was too much for me to truly accept.

While the darkness of fear is significant in *Exposure*, the story of the memoir is as much about desire – about the light. Among my motivations for the journey were the kinds of desire any 25-year-old prone to a bit of imaginative excess might have. There were visions of a future of excitement and profundity and achievement. There was my desire to enter the 'flow of

life over the world', which I'd long imagined as a stream of spirit and intensity and *happeningness* lying out in the great world, waiting for me to dive into it. And there was physical desire, now released from its Catholic cage, and looking fanatically out at the world, at all the ground I had to make up for.

Are you getting the idea? The keywords being 'desire', 'fear', 'lots of', and 'illusion' ... But I'll say no more about the book for fear of running out of time.

HOW DO YOU WRITE darkness, and what are some of darkness's meanings? The first thing I'd say here is that I think you cope with writing darkness, cope with darkness and write darkness in basically the same way. First you gain understanding of it; then you gain distance from it; and then you put the darkness through a kind of darkness prism, refracting it so that it can't overwhelm you or the reader. You energise it, and you split it, and the parts it splits into – parts of comedy, beauty, meaning, terror, sadness and so on – you reassemble according to how you want to affect your readers.

The comedy, which Lenny Bruce brilliantly defined as tragedy plus time, is not as hard as it seems. That is not a claim on my own behalf. I think most of us know intuitively how easy it is produce it: how, at a certain point, painful or stupid things become funny. For example, not long before I left on my trip I tried to help a policeman parallel park his car so insistently that he ended up arresting me. It's that kind of thing. It was scary at the time.

But refracting darkness into comedy, tragedy, beauty and meaning is not just so you or the reader can cope or to gain maximal effect on the reader. It's also so you don't miss darkness's deepest meanings. One of them is that fear, for many of us (in fact I think for most us) acts in a strange dialectic. Fear can exile us from our own lives, yet we can only reclaim our lives through reconciling with, living with and indeed embracing fear.

Among the most profound of darkness's meanings is, of course, the paradoxical light of death. There was a reason for the memento mori, a reason why medieval and Renaissance poets kept skulls on their desks. The things we love are as precious to us as they are only because one day they or

we won't be around anymore. Because we will have to say goodbye.
Because we know we will lose them.

That finally is why literature goes to the darkness of death: to make us see and feel, if even for a moment, how achingly, how heartbreakingly fragile and fleeting all that we love is, and how it will all too soon be taken away.