

Email: 23-4-2008

Hi Andrew,

Divine day here....just now in uni library looking through some of the photocopies of your writing you sent some time ago. Very touched by what I have read so far, written in March 2006 and circling around your father's weakening and then passing. Powerful to read.

Just come from my parents' home and chopping wood for them this morning. Mum and dad have heart conditions and both in hospital last week in Melbourne, dad having short blackouts. So the frailty of my parents, and particularly dad, is at the fore. Compounded, I think, by my own less than rock solid state (eyes very poor and still a fog of low grade fatigue).

It feels like your writing of your father may be the thing to focus on in pairing our work, even if it means letting go of the idea of trying to match exact dates. The general parallel diary process for us both during 2006/7, in our different mediums of words and paint, is enough. Thinking 12 images and 12 pieces of writing.

In terms of 'drought' overlay to this project, my interest is in the implication of the sudden loss of something that was previously so present. And the paradox of loss...how abrupt absence can manifest as a form of presence and how there can be a strange beauty, if not majesty, in the difficult process of loss.

The series of 231 small gouache paintings I made in 2006/7, after the transplant, were all about wanting to extract something extra from the difficulty. Colour was critical at that time, as was the daily process of painting. As hard, whacky and as testing that time of recovery was, there was a sense of something big and fateful playing out in the overlay of body and land depletion. This was heightened by what I was seeing out my front door - the lack of rain and the crazy stuff of a goanna, wallaby and an echidna rocking up (not all at a the same time) for water, like never before.

Hopefully the words and images will end up being good companions. The beginning point for the images was memory of the sky on dusk on the daily drive west from Horsham. The extraordinary skies held promise, despite the parched foreground, both environmentally and bodily. I feel like there is a flavour in your words of you also looking to the sky.

The fact that we had not met at that stage - with you at your desk in your studio in Mosman near the sea, and me at my small, low table at night in the shack on the Wimmera River - makes it all the more special and right. It seems that a basic joy of living is in the chance and design of how the dots are joined over time, forming friendship, networks and structures to hold things together. Meeting you later at Kavisha and Andy's wedding at Merri Creek park in February 2007 - at the very spot where the paintings began 11 months earlier (needing to be in the sun and to see the late afternoon light hitting the ghost gums) - is curious and wonderful.

So I hope we can pull something out of this short time frame of retrieving our diary entries, pairing them up, and forming an 'artist's book'. It seems the way to go is to keep it simple and low tech and very hand made, in terms of cost and time and aesthetics.

Hope there is something in all of this.

Warmest,
Anthony

Preface : Sunflowers

1 August 2008

As Anthony says, I was sitting in my workroom in Mosman, trying to finish a novel, while pondering the death of my father the year before. These texts are documents from that time.

My father Phil died on July 7 2005. It was, needless to say, a tumultuous time. The night before my father died it had become clear that the end was near. It was also clear that he needed access to all the morphine he wanted. I had a chat with the nursing staff, to make sure they knew this was the family's wish. Then I lit off to the pub with a friend. On my way there I stopped by the wishing well in the hospital grounds, fumbled for a two dollar coin – somehow I knew that a one dollar wish would never do – and I made my wish and flung the coin with all my power into the wishing well. My wish shocked me, because I'd just wished that my father would die, and be free of agony. I'd never known that love could reveal itself with such stark features.

The Guinness slid down a treat, and as I drank it I contemplated another stark reality – wondering what I'd do if my father asked for a pillow job before the night was ended. Despite my agitation I also felt a strange calm and certainty, knowing that I'd simply have to step up to the mark and perform this horrid labour of love, if it was asked of me. It seemed a filial duty, and an expression of my love for my father, that I could not shirk. My friend and I headed back to the hospital, to my relief my father was sleeping, and looked more peaceful than at any other time I'd seen him that day. He looked serene.

“Let's go back to the pub”, I said. I wanted to get hammered, and wondered if I'd ever see my father alive again. Though one could not be sure, it seemed likely this would be his last night on earth. We went to work on the Guinness then, before we left the pub we shifted over to whisky, and then we stumbled off.

I walked my friend home, then bumbled for a moment, before deciding to go and see my father. This was a moment I was dreading, because I feared that he'd be travelling badly, and if he was in agony I'd ask him if he wanted to be snuffed out, and if he said Yes, my course was set. The lift travelled slowly as it carried me back up to the ward, and I wondered if I'd look back on that lift ride as some last gasp of freedom – I knew that if I had to kill my dad, I could end up in prison. I also knew that right then I didn't give a damn about my puny ever after, and if my father put the hard word on me I'd simply have to do it. For the first time in my life I'd realised that death can also be deliverance, and I could not countenance my father suffering a needless agony. He'd already told us that he was ready to die.

I was stumbling with the booze when I walked into the lift, but when I walked out of it, and down the corridors to my father's room, it seemed I'd suddenly sobered up. I was walking straight, with clear purpose.

I knew it was all over when I turned the last corner, and saw the night nurse leaning against a wall, talking with my nephew. She looked like a woman who'd just been relieved of a great burden, or as if somehow she'd just come off duty. “He died peacefully”, she said, and I made a silent prayer of thanks to the god of morphine. I flipped into thank you mode then, holding the night nurse's hand, thanking her for everything she'd done to ease my father's pain in his last nights. Walking into the ward, I could see with my own eyes that Phil was dead. My mother, Hilarie, said “You can kiss him if you like, he's still warm....” I kissed Phil then.

It's funny the way the old sex roles kick in, sometimes. There was no need to discuss who'd call the funeral parlour - this was the son's job, time to step up to the mark with no complaint, and get on with the ugly job at hand. I was surprised by my equanimity right then. I found the public phone in the ward, and rang The White Ladies.

Just as we were finishing our conversation, the woman at the other end of the line said “Do you mind if I give you some advice? Your mother doesn’t need to see your father put onto the trolley and wheeled down to the morgue. Say your goodbyes and go. Believe me, your mother doesn’t need to see it.”

“None of us do!” I countered.

“Say your goodbyes, and go.”

I put the phone down, relieved to find that I’d gotten through the rotten job, and hadn’t gone to pieces.

Finally we’d packed Phil’s things, we were ready to go, but unable to leave. I heard a clanking in a nearby corridor, and feared it was the trolley come to collect my father’s corpse. Standing round the bed with my mother and my sisters, feeling there was something we still had to do, though we didn’t know what. In another family The Lord’s Prayer might have done the trick, but this was not our way. To my astonishment I heard myself begin to sing I Can’t Give You Anything But Love, and the old song became our hymn. It grew a little strange when we sang “Gee, it’s great to see you looking swell, baby...” but we soldiered on and sang it to the end.

There was a strange intensity to those days. I’ve never been present in a labour ward, but the volcanic emotional states we passed through made we wonder if we’d not been present at some kind of birth, except this was the birthing of a death. The next evening my mother and one of my sisters and I had to go and choose the clothes my father would wear to his funeral. As we approached the front door, I said “This could be difficult, let’s try and do this the best we can!”

To our surprise, as soon as we entered the house, we were overcome by a sense of Phil’s sweetness. It wrapped around us like a comforting shawl. Our memories of him were full of his gentleness and humour, and it made the difficult business possible. I began to wonder if this physical sense of Phil’s sweetness was perhaps his truest legacy to us all.

Two other details demand retelling here.

At the crematorium, after my father’s funeral, my mother and I were finally alone, standing by the coffin, feeling there was one last thing we needed to do before I closed the curtains and we left the building. We had no idea what that thing was. We had a confab, and I told my mother how, those nights that Phil was just too knackered to tell his son a goodnight story, he’d say “I’ll tell you the story of Jack and The Glory. Shall I begin it? That’s all that’s in it...” My mother gave me a strange look, then said “Every night before we fell asleep, I’d say to your father Goodnight, Sweetie. Then it was alright to fall asleep.”

We walked back to the coffin. “I’ll tell you the story of Jack and The Glory. Shall I begin it? That’s all that’s in it” I said. And my mother said “Goodnight, Sweetie.” Then I closed the curtains, and we left.

The summer before my father died, I did something I’d never managed to do before – I grew my first sunflowers. At Phil’s wake I broke the seedheads open and passed them round the assembled mob, inviting all present to plant some seeds in Phil’s memory. That next summer there were 70 or 80 sunflowers blooming in Phil’s garden. My mother planted two seeds in Phil’s ashes. The stems that grew there were taller than my mother, and their flowers were bigger than my mother’s head.

Writing these journals was one way of coming to terms with the momentous happenings of my father’s death. To borrow Anthony’s phrase, I’d begun my own small reckoning with a difficult majesty...

Andrew Lindsay

March 14 2006

Walking home, with a bottle of Cooper's stout in my shoulderbag, I realise that tomorrow is Phil's birthday, he would have been 88. I found the photo my sister Christine gave me, of Phil at a wedding in the mountains. Was this two years ago? He looks fine, he and Hilarie both. And how lovely they look together, they look like lovers. I don't know if I'd have said this, or if I'd have seen this, two years ago. The ease between them, a gentle familiarity that seems readily punctured by some new hilarity they're sharing...a handsome couple they make. Or made. I wonder how Hilarie will cope with this, the first birthday, with her mate now ashes in the bottom of her garden. There's a single sprouting sunflower shoot by the memory stones.

It was odd, being at the hospital again today, the first time I've been there since he died. Walking down the drive, past the wishing well, I wondered if I should have gone to the well and thrown in another coin, to thank the well for granting me my wish, my father's ease at last, and speedy death.

"It's only a wishing well" I told myself, but I remembered the force with which I made my wish, on that last night, and the fact that it was granted, somehow. I hesitated, and I didn't cross the road and toss a coin back in, just to say Thank You to the spirits of the wishing well. Perhaps I was avoiding a confrontation with the facts of that last night, and those last days of my father's life. It's odd, because some part of me knows that I should have crossed the road, and made – not a wish, a simple giving of thanks. I've a feeling that next time I'm there, which will be in two weeks, I might cross the road this time, and throw a coin into the wishing well, and give my thanks. It's absurd, perhaps. If I felt I could walk inside the church, and light a candle with equanimity...if I felt this would make sense in the cosmos in which my father dwelt...but this comfort is somehow denied. I deny it to myself, because for me the sacred house has become too corrupt. And I know that, for my father, to perform this act in his memory or honour would be a travesty, for Phil and for that church. A betting slip would be truer to the young man he was, a betting slip, a cigarette butt and an emptied glass of beer. A ripe mango, a bowl of strawberries, blueberries, and perhaps some lemon gelato, would be truer to the man he became in the last two decades of his life.

And once again I give my thanks, and count my blessings, that I was fathered by such a sweet, sweet man. The man he was, and the man that he became. Loving, finally, both of these fathers, mine.

I hesitate, then phone Hilarie. Wondering if, by chance, she might prefer to have dinner with Nean and I on Phil's birthday, rather than going to her Zonta meeting tomorrow night. She's brisk, a bit stroppy.

“There's no need to be taking flowers to the grave every weekend. Think of him with love and respect, that's all you need to do...”

There's a lively bolshiness in her, as she redefines her life, and maps out some new terrain, and it's a great thing, that she has the will and the vitality to do so.

She enjoyed herself at Womad. “And I wouldn't have been there if Phil had been alive!” These are the deep truths. And I am glad that Hilarie has the strength and liveliness to embrace them: it would be so easy to become maudlin, and utterly immersed in grief, unable or unwilling to succumb further to the great pleasures and deep lessons of this life.

March 16 2006

At the toy factory yesterday, it was Phil's birthday - at a certain point Mum mentions Phil's death, and a neon light above our heads dies right then. We look at each other, flabbergasted, appalled and surprised, it's just uncanny. I joke that maybe Dad is listening, and Hilarie says "I hope not! I hope he doesn't have to be bothered with all this nonsense!" We've been discussing some of the practical dilemmas we need to solve, about running the business, and the impending move to new premises. There's a pleasing matter-of-factness to Hilarie at these times. And, perhaps like me, she finds the notion of an afterlife quite appalling. I've not asked her this. Certainly she has no truck with it when people make remarks like "Phil's still here" or "Phil's up there looking on..." She truly finds this an appalling notion, that Phil would have to be bothered with a lot of the bullshit that mires one in the everyday. People mean well when they mouth these words, but Hilarie is right, so much of it is platitude and bullshit. Here I paraphrase, bullshit is my word for it, not hers.

Even so, it's bizarre when, later on, and talking about Phil once again, the dead neon light suddenly flickers back to life. Hilarie and I looking at each other, a little embarrassed, both of us unable to avoid thinking about Phil's presence, post-mortem, on this, his 88th birthday...

March 23 2006

About 6.15pm, just back from Mum's. Getting the sculptures down to the bottom garden. They're a present to Phil, on his absent birthday, and to herself : a naked woman, a bench with a lion's head, a cat, a frog, two large and two small cranes (or are they herons?) Just managed to carry the naked sitting woman, taking great care not to hold her by the breasts - it seemed unseemly...The bronze bench with the head of a lion defeated me, lugging the naked woman left me shagged, and so I thought it best to let the lion sleep in the drive overnight...

Rainbow lorikeets perched on the great seedheads of the sunflowers in the bottom of the garden, the flowers swollen after feasting on my father's ashes for a season.

March 25 2006

Playing the soprano saxophone for the first time in months, finding a liberty there that's utterly pleasing, the bright belltones, the golden tones, somehow, and within this ringing pleasure I recall the vivid horror of playing at my 50th birthday party in Melbourne, at The Purple Turtle, with Blind Man Driving and friends, and the oppressive knowledge, as I sought a levity and keen tone, that my father was slowly dying, the keening tone indeed, no wonder it was difficult to take flight in the music, the hard weight of it wrapping me, the unavoidable, shocking truth : that Phil was dying, was already too weak to make the journey down, the first time the party animal in him just couldn't rally to the party...

March 29 2006

Going back to Royal North Shore Hospital, whether public or private, is a strange feat to accomplish, in the wake of Phil's death. And so it was, yesterday, accompanying Nean to see her foot specialist. Having a coffee in the café downstairs, it's impossible not to think about being there with Phil and Hilarie. Waiting for Nean outside the toilets near the radiography department, where I'd waited with Phil to collect the x-rays that yielded their bad news.

Happily, Nean's prognosis is not dire : "Let's have a celebratory drink" she suggests. We head off, it seems hard to avoid going back to the pub where I drank Guinness on the night Phil died. Somehow I feel I must return there. I'm apprehensive, but tell myself it's better to face the apprehension, and enjoy the stout.

As we walk past the entrance to the public hospital I say to Nean "I'll do my best now not to burst into tears!" It's impossible to walk past the entrance and not recall how Hilarie and I stumbled out into the early morning, after Phil had died and we'd said our goodbyes, and sung around his corpse. Finding a flower stall setting up right there, buying Christmas Bush and Temple Bells. The fragile Temple Bells now cindered by the scorching summer heat.

We continue past the chapel. "Odd that I didn't once set foot inside it!" I remark to Nean, "I seem to have preferred the wishing well!" "You find solace where you find it" she says.

I'm reminded of a time, some years earlier, just before going in for minor surgery at the Mater. Wanting to pray we walked into their chapel, it felt hollow rather than hallow, and we fled. Outside I found a tree, and prayed, and to my delight and astonishment saw a mother bird with her new hatched chick, and then the father bird arrived...this was a blessing and a gift to apprehend, this was my prayer, and I turned to face my surgery vivified and hopeful, for all my apprehension.

As we passed the Emergency Ward I felt another jolt, recalling Phil's final admission, waiting for the ambulance to arrive, and when I finally saw him he looked deathly pale, and weak. The tears are in my eyes and mouth now, though I suppress the impulse to sob. I do not weep. Instead Nean and I keep walking until we arrive at the wishing well. In daylight it does not seem so prepossessing. It's a haven for smokers, which is fine by us, but alas, the pool is empty, there are smudges of brackish muddy water just visible, and bracken growing on the base of it. There's not a coin visible, it's a derelict wishing well, an abandoned pond. But I need to give thanks, make my small prayers to the world, pay my respects for the succour gained that night of my father's dying: and that night my prayers were answered, my wish came true, it might have been co-incidence, but I feel there's a small duty to acquit. I find the only gold coin in my pocket, a single dollar, there's not a sign of another coin in the ruined, emptied well, and so I tuck my coin into a muddy pocket of earth, and then I make my prayer of thanks, and praise. I wish for nothing, this is my way of saying thanks, mutely, as two women smoke their fags, and are perhaps bemused by the strange ritual playing out before them.

Then we strike out for the pub. A glass of white wine for Nean, a glass of stout for me. The stout tastes bitter, as if they've not cleaned out their pipes for quite some time. After a while I become aware of a youngish man, muttering to himself, I try not to attract his attention, he seems surly, and he's drinking from a pint glass of beer - it is at least his second, and perhaps he's had much more, he's either deeply intoxicated, or suffering from a mental illness, or both. I don't want to provoke him. I'm sitting with my back to him and try not to engage his regard as I turn and survey the room, then strike off to the bar for a second round of drinks.

Coming back to our table somehow I can't help turning in his direction, and he catches my eye and holds it, I can't discern each word or phrase, but I begin to catch his drift, as he now unfolds a dreadful story. He's been visiting his brother, his mother is still at the hospital.

"My brother's in a coma, he's been up there two weeks, but I don't think they can do much for him, you can tell what a doctor's saying to you just by looking at them...he was shuffling his feet while he was talking, they can't save his brain, they reckon there's a bit of brain activity, but they don't know what it is, basically he's going to be a vegetable all his life, that's what the doctor says, he says You're going to have to decide what to do, and what's best for him, he's not going to recover so, you know... you might have to let him go, it might be best, he'll have to spend his life in an institution..."

The young man breaks off, and licks his lips. He's tanked. A scrubby short blondish beard around his mouth and chin, he's a stocky character, friendly demeanour, but he's shattered by this horror.

"He was caught up in a pub brawl - three blokes came in and punched him, wham, wham, wham, the force of the impact when his head hit the concrete damaged his brain...he's been there two weeks, and I know, if it was me, I'd say Let him die! That's what he'd want! He wouldn't want to be a fucking vegetable his whole life, and he won't know who we are...but Mum and Dad, they won't let him go, Mum won't, but I'm his brother...if you said to him You can spend the rest of life in an institution he'd say Fuck that!"

He's on his feet now. Someone has taken his table, thinking that he's with us, he's got his beer glass perched on our table. I'm looking nervously at Nean, because her mother was in a coma for three weeks, and I know that hearing the young man talk of his dilemma is hotwiring her to the grief and horror of that ordeal, so many years ago, and yet some pain is freshly minted by this young man's account. At the same time I can't turn my back on this man now, he is so clearly in distress, so clearly needing to talk to someone, to have someone sit and hear him out as he grapples with the nascent horror of his dilemma.

About the best I can manage in my rare and reticent interjections is "That's horrible...That's really horrible...That's fucking horrible. You've got some very hard decisions to make. Good luck."

The useless tokens of one's platitudes, and yet something must be said, a fundamental acknowledgement that must be made. The horror, seeing his pain and bafflement as he grapples with the nightmare. And the strange way that booze makes one loquacious, and shameless, airing the grief, walking naked in public as the grief strips one bare.

“I’ve got to go up there and say goodbye to him. The doctor said You might have to think what’s best for him, the quality of life he’ll have...it might be best to let him die. But Mum won’t let him go. But if it comes to a vote, I know which way I’ll be voting! If you’d met him, he was such a lovely bloke, so full of life. But he wouldn’t want it. I know which way I’ll be voting...”

I avert my gaze, to have a quick confab with Nean – I know how much she will be aching, just hearing the man airing his grief, so clearly and fundamentally ailing. And yet I feel a duty to listen, to bear witness.

I go to piss, and when I return he has disappeared. His unfinished pint glass on our table. I look for him twice in the pissers, and round the pub, and I can’t find him anywhere, feeling a need to respect some fundamental courtesy, and say goodbye, and wish him well. No doubt he’s headed off, steeling himself for the horrors that lie ahead, reeling with his drink, as I reeled up to the ward nine months ago, ready, if need be, to stifle the life out of my father, if it seemed the truest path of mercy and sweet justice. I’m staggered and shocked by the raw pain that’s been streaming out of this young man.

We finish our drinks and leave. It’s been a strange return, this first drink at the pub where I got tanked, mourning for my father, kept company by Graeme, my niece’s hubby, who stood by me as I made my own poor vigil. That night we’d gone back to the ward, and he’d seen Phil, already passing from view, though sleeping peacefully, and then at my request we went back to the pub and got truly tanked, and the next time I saw my darling pa he was dead. And my wish had been granted, and I didn’t need to kill him, and once again I said Thank God for morphine!

2 November 2006

I am in the garden, picking thyme, watercress and rocket for my tea...finding myself asking Phil to...no, asking for nothing, simply asserting that I'm doing my best...walking in his light, rather than his shadow. Struck by a singular fact - that even though the loved one dies, one's love does not die with them, but lives on, and becomes or remains a kind of sustenance that you can draw from, and draw on, like a well whose water remains sound, and vivifying. The strange deep solace that's to be found in this comforting fact, in this harsh world with its horrors. My love for my father, Phil, sustains me still. And I, at least for now, continue, feeling an abundant nurture, and thankfulness, something that astonishes me, and humbles me, some delightfully shocking truth I'd not previously divined, that fills me with gladness, and a wonder, and reveals an unexpected face of his immortality, some grace and deep finesse that endures far beyond the grave.

Postscript: November 5 2007

On the train from Spencer St to Croxton Station, coming back from the Natimuk Frinj Festival, I was thinking about Phil, and how we are different men, and how I so often use Phil as my yardstick. And gladly so. Pondering how he'd been baffled by my errant emotional and sexual conduct at times, telling a friend or family member "I've only ever been with the one woman in my whole life." Sitting on the train, giving thanks that Phil was a lovely man, who gave me a good moral compass, even when I've strayed from the true north of that compass. I felt a finger push me gently on the right shoulder. I turned to look, but there was no-one there.

Unique State book # 1

Text	Andrew Lindsay
Images	Anthony Pelchen
Printing	Alan Vickers
Construction	Anthony Pelchen

Inkjet prints on Hahnemuhle 308gsm paper

This book was formed between May and August, 2008. Its worth to us as artists has been as much in the process as in the result.

Many thanks to those who have considerably assisted us: Jeannine Fowler, Ann Peterson, Kavisha Mazzella, Lella Cariddi, Ian and Lorna Pelchen, Gary Pelchen, Kimelle Chapman, George Matoulas, Andy Macarthur, Benjamin Leslie, Ballarat University (Horsham campus).

August, 2008

Unique State book # 2

Text	Andrew Lindsay
Images	Anthony Pelchen
Printing	Alan Vickers
Construction	Anthony Pelchen

Inkjet prints on Hahnemuhle 308gsm paper

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August, 2008