

“The Mermaid’s Curse”

Case Study of a Multimodal Work-in-Progress

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ABSTRACT

“The Mermaid’s Curse” is a creative and critical experiment which draws on both the “combinational” approach to creativity described by Boden (2010: 32) and the idea of the author as “bricoleur-as-bowerbird” (Webb & Brien 2010: 199). Beginning in early May 2020, the author of “The Mermaid’s Curse” used Instagram as the primary “synaptic technology” (Harper 2015: 7) to share their work-in-progress, which combines short prose pieces (fiction and creative nonfiction) with images of their textile and digital art. The inclusion of visual art – a recently rediscovered part of the author’s creative practice - speaks to Barnard’s proposition that “multimodal practice” is a means to reclaim creativity that has been forgotten or suppressed (2019: 72). Multimodal writing is an opportunity to reach back and draw in previous practice which is then applied in new contexts, and a means of embracing the affordances and facing the challenges presented by digital platforms. This article is a multimodal account of a multimodal project. It combines analysis, reflection, creative writing and visual art as a means of examining multimodal practice in action. It is hoped that a close focus on a project that energised one practitioner’s approach may be helpful for other practitioners, serving as an encouragement to experiment with “code-switching” between different form or genres of creative expression within one overarching creative project.

Preface

It starts, as these things often do, with a title: “The Mermaid’s Curse”. Titles are like magnets. They draw ideas to themselves. I’m not sure where this particular title comes from. It simply drifts into my mind during the strange, early days of the UK’s first COVID-19 lockdown in the spring of 2020. The lockdown regulations in the UK are strict at this point, permitting only one short period of outdoor exercise each day starting from home. On my daily walk I feel as if I am obeying doctor’s orders, convalescing from an illness I haven’t had. Home for me is in the suburbs of Belfast, Northern Ireland. The Irish Sea is tantalisingly close. The days blaze, but the coast is forbidden to everyone but the lucky few who live within walking distance of the shore. Almost everything is out of reach.

“Code-switching” as creative practice

I have been a writer for nearly thirty years, and for a little over five years I have also been a practitioner of visual art, mainly working in textiles. Although my work has been exhibited and I’ve received commissions I hesitate to call myself a visual artist. Maybe this is because I lack formal qualifications in art, save for a long-ago A-level. Or, working as I do in academia, perhaps I have allowed myself to be persuaded that, as Seth Godin observes, “The educational-industrial complex has grown up around the idea that no one has the ability to create useful work without a certificate” (2020: 155). One of my objectives in working on “The Mermaids Curse” was to challenge this limiting belief and discover how my novice status as a visual artist might feed into my practice as a writer. As Barnard says, “If you feel that you are outside your area of expertise, this can enable a fresh perspective.” (2020: 124). My intention is to be a writer who produces “new works by simply expressing their own, often idiosyncratic personalities, in response to the internal and external worlds they inhabit” (Armstrong 2014: 2).

Code-switching, defined as “an individual’s use of two or more language varieties in the same speech event” which “can occur between forms recognised as distinct languages, or between dialects, registers, [...] or styles of a single language” (Woolard 2006: 73-74), is a fascinating concept for me as a creative practitioner working with text and visuals. Like the novelist and artist Sarah Baume, “I have always felt caught between two languages, though I can only speak in one” (2020: 51). In Baume’s case the one she can speak “goes down on paper and into my laptop,

in the hours before noon. The one I cannot speak goes down in small painted objects, in the hours after” (51). I do not split my time in such a regular and defined way. My writing and making must both take place after hours or at weekends, or in a few cherished days of study leave. I work in whichever form appeals to me most when I have an hour or so to devote to it.

The creative potential of switching languages can also be seen when a translated text presents me with an unfamiliar or unexpected phrase or image. One example of this is in an essay on embroidery and writing by Esther Andradi, an Argentinean novelist. Andradi explains that she kept a diary which she named “Margomar”, and goes on to say, “The word margomar [...] is an ancient form of naming embroidery, the origin of which is unknown. Margomar: embroider the land, write the sea” (2015: 17). That phrase “embroider the land, write the sea” is inscrutable and intriguing. It speaks to my instincts about multimodality: it suggests that interesting things happen when we switch between modes.

In order to analyse *how* these interesting things happen I propose an experiment to myself – and here I mean “experiment” in the scientific sense of being a procedure undertaken to test a hypothesis or find out something new, although I will be less methodical than a scientist. I take my title, my own developing practice in visual art and I confirm my experiment:

- I will deliberately “code-switch” between creative writing and visual art. I will post my outputs as they are created onto a dedicated Instagram account, @mermaids_curse, and linked Facebook page, “The Mermaid’s Curse”.
- I will also move between literary genres such as realist, fantasy and historical fiction, as well as pieces that present as factual, but are actually inventions.
- I will keep a lab book to record my actions, observations and reflections. (A lab book - not to be confused with a writer’s journal - is a methodical record of precise actions taken and their outcomes and is a key part of a scientist’s professional practice).
- As part of the final reflective process, I will consider and share what I have learned from the project, and how this might influence my future practice.

Sharing the work-in-progress on Instagram is an example of using what Harper calls “synaptic technologies”, i.e. technologies that are not fixed on an end result but are a medium for “reciprocal human experience” (2015: 7). Followers of @mermaids_curse respond to the posts, “liking” them, commenting, offering their own suggestions and responses. Sharing on Instagram is also a discipline and record of practice, requiring regular input, and the courage to expose fresh work to the world with only the lightest of curation and editing. There is, I find, an inherent tension in presenting an experimental work which readers may find “unpredictable, random and confusing” (Armstrong 2014: 5) on a platform like Instagram, where the purpose of posting is often to gain uncomplicated attention and validation.

Fragments, the novella-in-flash and multimodality

So much of our lived experience is fragmentary, and while there’s something bracing about accepting that stark truth, many writers and readers yearn for the safe haven of narrative, even though we know it’s nothing more than a comforting illusion. One model that allows the practitioner to shape fragmentary experience into an overarching narrative is the novella-in-flash.

Flash fiction is generally regarded as a complete story of between 100-1000 words, although different literary journals and competitions will have their own word limits. Hisham Bustani suggests that flash fiction offers readers “a greater opportunity to engage, contemplate, astonish, shock, and complete what the writer began” (2012: 52). As a reader and a writer, I have found that flash has the intensity of good poetry. It contains multitudes of story – implied as well as explicit – within a limited but well-chosen framework of words and can linger in the mind for years after reading.

Novella-in-flash is the term flash fiction publishers Abigail Beckel and Kathleen Rooney choose for “novellas composed entirely of standalone flash fiction pieces organised into a full narrative arc” (2014: np). They go on to describe it as a form that allows the writer to “build a world that is compact but complex simultaneously”. As Smith describes it, the novella-in-flash “acknowledges that experience and truth are never singular or easily legible but are always multiple and always morphing.” (2018: 176) Flash nonfiction too has its loose equivalents of the novella-in-flash, such as Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets*

(2017), where fragments of reflection and memoir are threaded together thematically by the colour blue. Given how effective this curation of fragments can be for fiction and nonfiction, I am interested to find out if I can make it work in a multimodal context. Here I am thinking not only of “The Mermaid’s Curse” project, for which the narrative operates across fiction, nonfiction and visual art, but also of this article, which will move to and fro between the critical and the creative. This is the approach to creative surprise Margaret Boden calls “combinational”, in that it “involves making unfamiliar combinations of familiar ideas.” (2010: 32) The novella-in-flash does not deny the fragments – indeed, it gives each of them its own space – but the writer has the power to curate the fragments into something more knowable, more familiar, like a question that is asked and answered. My approach to “The Mermaid’s Curse” has elements of the “bricoleur-as-bowerbird” (Webb & Brien 2010: 199), in that I gather the fragments I feel drawn to, and then assemble them. The difference, perhaps, is that I also *make* the fragments.

Play

Five years ago, before I embarked on my first major piece of textile art, I sought out a mentor. I approached the artist Rosalind Wyatt, whose work has been an inspiration to me since I first encountered it in the book *Strange Material* (Prain, 2014). We agreed an arrangement whereby she would mentor me on my textile art project in exchange for my advising her on ways of writing about her own project, “The Stitch Lives of London” (2016).

Rosalind advised me to set aside time to do some quick, messy, low-stakes work. It’s a way of limbering up, of working unselfconsciously in the way a young child will when given some crayons and sheets of blank paper. Writers have a range of techniques for evading their inner critic, such as freewriting. Artists too have an armoury of quick tricks: simple mark-making with no purpose in mind; drawing an object in five seconds; drawing with the non-dominant hand; drawing with one’s eyes shut.

I follow the advice to play as I begin this project. I choose fabric strips that echo coastal colours and layer them on top of each other, along with a piece of dried seaweed. I stitch them together using a technique called free machine embroidery (where the fabric is moved in any direction the stitcher chooses, so that a line of stitches is more like a scribble). Then

I slash the piece to various depths with a scalpel, so that different layers are visible. Making this piece takes around 30-45 minutes from start to finish, which I find an appropriate amount of time for this type of creative play. It's sufficient to produce a small, complete piece of work.

From this point in the article I will interleave the critical element with examples of Instagram posts from "The Mermaid's Curse", beginning with the very first post, namely, the piece of playful textile art described above.

Instagram post #1 – 17 May 2020



#mermaidscurse #textileart #embroidery

Procreate®

Procreate is a digital illustration app for the iPad. It offers multiple options for painting and drawing, without the need for physical art materials. For me it's a means of instant gratification, with hundreds of colours and effects effortlessly on hand. Every mistake can be instantly undone. Like most instant gratification, it is ultimately unsatisfying. The strokes and taps of the Apple pencil gliding over the iPad screen lack the texture and engagement of handiwork. Nevertheless, it has its uses, particularly when I don't immediately have time to embark on a more substantial piece of work. So when a cryptic phrase pops into my head one morning during a particularly busy time at work, I use Procreate to turn it into something visual. Having made the commitment to post content on Instagram as it is made, I feel pressure to constantly create *something* – anything – and to leverage even fleeting thoughts into posts. Many practitioners accept the value of developing a habitual creative practice – one that we engage in regularly, regardless of inspiration or motivation. In many ways this project, and the platform I am using, compels me to habitual

creation. Procreate does at least enable that when more time-consuming work is not achievable.

Instagram post #4 – 18 May 2020



#mermaids #mermaidscurse #multimodal #procreate

The patron saint of mermaids

I was brought up a Northern Irish Protestant, and saints do not feature in that tradition, save for in the names of many Church of Ireland (Anglican) churches. Notions of miracle cures due to saintly intercession are dismissed as delusional, and praying to saints as idolatry. I first encountered the idea that saints had specific talents through a Catholic friend at secondary school, and was amused – and secretly intrigued – to hear that there was a patron saint of lost causes (St Jude) who might be prevailed upon to help with exam results. My interest in patron saints has continued, particularly in the way their strange life stories sometimes suggest a grain of historical truth overlaid with centuries of myth and invention. There's one for almost everything – ugly people, impossible dreams, bearded ladies – but not, it seems, of mermaids. Perhaps it was felt that mythical creatures do not require anyone to intercede on their behalf. So, I invent one, choosing a location I hope most readers will never have been to, mingling facts with the inventions. Even imaginary saints need an icon as a visual focus for prayers of intercession, so once again I use Procreate, this time to upload and manipulate an image of a Latin American *retablo* (a painting placed on an altar) of a female saint.



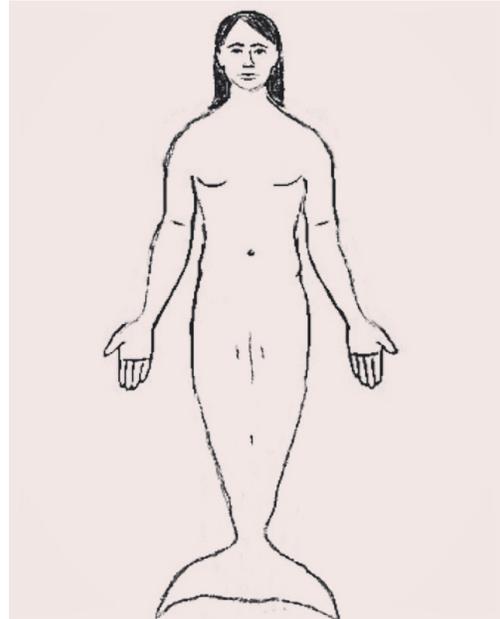
Santa Shimashiri was an Inca princess who converted to Christianity following the Spanish conquest of Peru. She refused to marry a pagan prince, having taken a vow to remain a virgin. Her enraged father had her thrown into the sea to drown, but the legends say that she was saved by dolphins and other sea creatures who carried her to safety on a remote island. Santa Shimashiri was not widely known outside the Trujillo district. The one church dedicated to her was destroyed in the earthquake of 1619 and never rebuilt.

#mermaids #patronsaint #Trujillo #nottrue
#procreate

The untruthfulness of the image I create – the fact that I have taken an existing photograph of a real *retablo*, changed it with layers of colour, and added my own clumsy illustration of a dolphin, seems to fit with the invented “facts” I present. And in spite of the #nottrue hash tag, at least one Instagram follower thinks Santa Shimashiri is real. Proof, if nothing else, that hash tags are the small print of an Instagram post, and as such are often unread.

Anatomy of a Mermaid

I want readers to consider what the authentic physicality of a mermaid might be. I think of footage I have seen of a line-caught tuna fighting for its life as an angler reels it in, the sinuous, furious strength of it. I want my mermaids to be as non-human as they are human, both physically and emotionally.



The anatomy of the mermaid is dramatically different to her portrayals in both popular and high culture. The physiology of the upper body is similar to that of a human female, albeit more heavily muscled. The primary difference in the upper body is that the mermaid does not have functioning breasts. She feeds her young through the mammary slits seen here on the lower body on either side of the urogenital opening. In this sense the anatomy of the lower body is similar to that of marine mammals such as dolphins and whales.

#mermaid #mermaids #dolphins #procreate #nottrue

Flash fiction #1 – “Lure”

Instagram post #9 – 31st May 2020

That Sunday the pull of the sea was irresistible. It felt like so long since she'd driven anywhere. Would there be police checkpoints? Like childhood car journeys to the country. Dark green uniforms. Burly country voices. Or those alien English accents. Army fatigues and rifles. It was so long ago, it might have been a folk-memory rather than her own.

How quickly her world had folded in on itself. She would go. Drive to her nearest sea. Take the back roads.

Just the sight of it lifted her, the navy-blue water flecked with white, glimpsed as the car crested the last of the hills and began its descent into the expensive little town by the shore. The road curved, impossibly

picturesque, flanked by trees coming into their fullness and houses as perfect as they were unaffordable. She negotiated the dogleg junction onto the dual carriageway, and drove on until she reached the road that led down to the beach.

The car park was blocked off. Someone had placed traffic cones all along the road. The police, she assumed, or perhaps local residents in a concerted act of discouragement to visitors. There was nowhere to stop. She tried to look at the sea as she drove slowly along the road. A family emerged from a driveway. Two children on bicycles. The mother and father walking behind, cool and fresh-pressed as if they'd stepped from an advert for a perfect life.

#flashfiction #sea #beach

The Mermaid's Mirror

I make a fake artefact. I take a mirror from an old makeup compact, and scratch it front and back with coarse sandpaper and a scalpel. I embed it in fabric – cotton scrim, wadding and dyed raw silk fibres – and hand stitch it all together with embroidery thread in a muted palette of murky greens and browns. I use a rough approximation of shisha stitch – the sort that is used to attach tiny mirrors to fabric in traditional Asian textiles - and embellish the whole piece with French knots.

When it's done I take it to a country park by the coast. The park has just reopened, but is limiting numbers. I arrive mid-morning. The beach is already busy. People are stretched on towels, grilling themselves in the glare of the sun. I find a quieter, rockier part of the beach. My only companions are a young couple sitting together some way off.

I dip the mermaid's mirror into the shallows. I bury it there, and film myself "finding" it.

The young lad decides it's time for a paddle. He stands up, and walks carefully over the stones to the water's edge. I wonder what his story is.

Instagram post #10 – 1st June 2020



Beachfind. Mermaid's mirror?

#beachcombing #mermaid #mirror #seashore
#textileart

Instagram post #12 – 5th June 2020



The mermaid's mirror after a few hours to dry out

#mermaids #mirror #beachfinds #beachcombing

Flash fiction #2 – "The Mermaid's First Sailor"

Instagram post #13 – 7th June 2020

I found him sleeping on the seabed, and brought him to the caves. I waited for him to wake. His eyes were open. His mouth spoke seawater. He did not move.

Over the days he changed colour. A darkening storm-sky. My cousin told me, "They breathe without thinking. They sleep with their eyes closed."

The caves are cool. The moon waxed and waned. My cousin said, "Give him back to the sea."

He wore a gold ring on his finger. I kept it to remember him by.

#flashfiction #flash #mermaids #sea #story

Words without pictures

Instagram is a visual platform, and I discover that posts consisting only of text fall flat. When I post the first two flash fictions of the project, even though I have taken care to typeset them beautifully so that they appear to be an image of a printed page, the only followers who “like” and comment are fellow writers. I want to draw in other readers, including those who are more interested in images than words, and might not normally pause to read a story. I learn to find or create an image to go with each textual post.

Somewhere along the journey of my life I came to believe I was a words person, not a pictures person. My stories came into my head in words, not images. I heard my characters, and had to force myself to see them. My mother told me I could read before I could walk. She claimed I had read her old school translation of Caesar’s *Gallic Wars*, sitting on the kitchen floor as my nappies whooshed around in the twin-tub washing machine. “Mummy, what’s a cohort?” the infant me asked.

And yet, my most vivid memories are of images and things and making. I can still see the glorious technicolour of my Ladybird “Well-Loved Tales” (a series of richly illustrated retellings of fairy stories which seemed a ubiquitous part of childhood in the UK from the mid-1960s onward). I remember turning shoeboxes into miniature houses. And to this day I have an almost photographic memory for every item of clothing I’ve ever owned, and the emotions I associate with them.

This project, and the implacable judgement of Instagram followers, reminds me that on such social media platforms words without images are only half-alive. This is a challenge for writers more used to regarding their words as sufficient in themselves. Barnard (2019: 72) advises that “the task of developing a multimodal practice comes to be a case not of constructing something new but, instead, of reclaiming something that is accessible to use already but has been suppressed”, and this has proved to be the case for me in pursuing this project.

Vessels

The coast of northern County Down is within a half-hour drive from my home and is abundant in seaweed. Ruffled, leathery strips of giant kelp lie on the beach where the waves have tossed them. Rocky inlets and harbours bubble with bladder-wrack and egg-wrack. Sea lettuce undulates in the shallows like chiffon in a breeze. Seaweed seems so robust and *material*, like a fabric. On my trip to the beach I plan to stitch wet seaweed together, thinking to make a piece of “cloth” that I can drape around a bowl and allow to dry into a rigid vessel. I opt for sea lettuce, which seems as sheer and pliable as habotai silk. However, it proves to be an unaccommodating raw material. It falls apart in my hands as I pull needle and thread through it. The piece of textile art I had envisaged dissolves with it, like the heartbroken fairy-tale mermaid who turns into sea foam. I can only manage one tiny piece of embroidered illustration.

Instagram post #14 – 7th June 2020



Stitched seaweed

#handstitched #seaweed #mermaids #embroidery

The same day I bring some seaweed home, drape the separated fronds over the bowl, and wrap it in place with linen thread. I seal it with PVA glue, and let it dry over several days. The glue and the seaweed dry at different rates, so that the final piece is pleasingly asymmetrical.

Instagram post #15 – 7th June 2020



Seaweed vessel. Made from seaweed wrapped in linen thread
#seaweed #linen #textileart

The Language of Mermaids

Instagram post #17 – 21st June 2020



Almost no evidence has been found of a written mermaid language. It is unclear if this example from the mid-1800s is genuine or fake. It is written in dark ink (possibly squid ink) on seaweed, and appears to be in the extinct language known as Sabir, or Mediterranean Lingua Franca. It reads;
Mi star sereia.
Ti qui star ti?
Non intendir,
tazir, tazir

which translates as;
I am mermaid.
Who are you?
If you do not understand,
be silent, be silent.

#mermaid #seaweed #sabir #nottrue

Flash fiction #3 – “Brothers”

Instagram post #18 – 21st June 2020



The boy found a spot high up in the dunes. From here he could see the expanse of the strand, the cars parked in two uneven rows, the shifting tide-line where the water slipped in and out, stroking the sand into ripples and ridges and shallow lagoons. He could see their gold Cortina, their windbreak sagging between its posts, his mother standing to stretch. She turned to look in his direction, one hand shading her eyes as if she was a sailor on the prow of a boat. He waved at her, and she waved back.

There was a line of haze where the sky met the sea, the two blues meeting and merging to a smoky grey. A ship moved slowly along the horizon from west to east. It was grey too. Even from here he could tell it was momentous in size.

His little brother emerged from behind the windbreak and began stomping towards the dunes, arms swinging from side to side as he laboured across the soft sand.

A few minutes later his brother stood in front of him, gasping from the climb up the dunes, hands on hips. “Here you are,” he said emphatically. The pose, the words, made the boy want to laugh. It was a perfect, unwitting impression of their father. His little brother was learning how to negotiate the world by copying the few men and bigger boys he encountered. It

was as if he did not know how to be himself. They sat side-by-side in the dunes. The wind hissed through the marram grass. Voices drifted up from the beach: shouts and shrieks and mothers calling their children.

“What are you staring at?” his little brother said.

“The horizon,” he said. “Where the sky meets the sea.” The grey ship had moved out of sight beyond the headland.

“Can we go there?”

“I can. Some day I’ll go even further. To the horizon beyond the horizon.”

His brother frowned up at him. “Can I come too?”

“Course you can.”

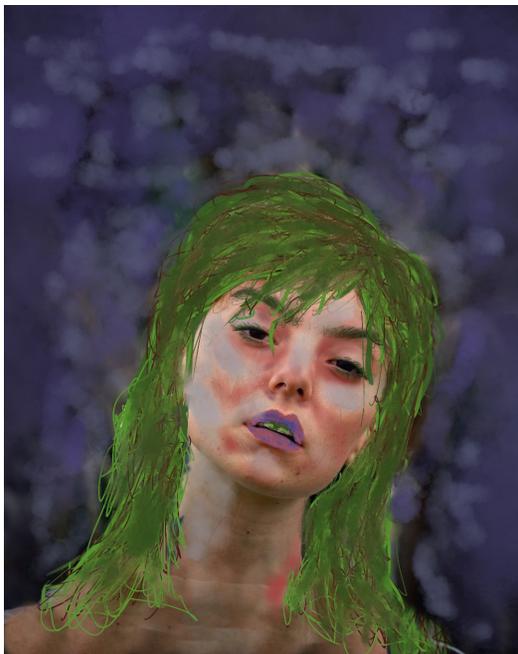
The reply contented his little brother. He ruffled the boy’s hair, and felt a tug of sadness and pity and shame. He wondered if his brother would remember this lie some day. The horizon was smoky grey. Horizons always were.

#flashfiction #sea #beach #coast

Flash fiction #4 – “The Sea Cure”

Up until this point in the project the flash fictions have been no longer than 400 words, but when it comes to “The Sea Cure” the story unfurls in a more maximalist late-19th-century style.

Instagram post #19 – 25 June 2020



The young gentleman returned at last to his family seat in the county of D___, his health

ruined and his peace of mind quite destroyed. His trouble had come upon him not through the dissipations common to young men of his age and class – indeed, he was a diffident and somewhat pious fellow – but rather through an over-serious application to his studies, and a disappointment in love which had crushed him utterly. His parents and sisters welcomed him back with concern and solicitude, and assured themselves that the healthful climate of D___ and the happy associations of his childhood home would soon restore him in body and spirit.

After a month or so, with the heat of high summer mellowing into autumn, he was persuaded to walk beyond the grounds and down the rough, narrow path to the quiet little cove where he had whiled away many serene hours in his boyhood. In those far off days his only companion was a book, and he liked nothing more than to perch himself on a shelf of rock overlooking the sea-caves, reading until one of the servants was sent to call him home to supper. Now, alas, he had no patience for reading, and the books that had so enthralled him just a few years ago sat untouched in his bedroom bookcase.

With some effort he scrambled onto the old familiar shelf of rock – how low and modest it seemed now, compared with his memories of it – and sat brooding about Miss Whitehead – *Sophia!* – reliving the mortification of her rebuffal. While replaying these unhappy events in his mind, his unseeing eyes were fixed on a tangled mass of bladder wrack that blanketed the water near the entrance to the caves. After a time, though, his attention drifted from his inner world to that which was before him. There was something in the appearance of the dark, ulcerated seaweed that repulsed him, and yet he could not avert his gaze. It heaved with each swell of the sea, and then seemed to exhale as the water receded. Suddenly there was tumult in the clearer water out beyond the seaweed – the splash of some great movement in the waves, and a clamour of seagulls squawking and diving – and then, directly below him, something surfaced through the bladder wrack and heaved itself into the entrance of one of the caves. His poor, weakened mind struggled to comprehend

what lay before his eyes. The creature had a tail, like a seal, but the upper part of it was... human. It lay propped on its elbows like an Ancient Roman at a feast, and feast it did, for it had a large fish clamped in its teeth, which it now proceeded to devour. The gulls swooped and screamed, hungry for some scrap of the creature's catch, but it waved them away. When she had finished – for the young man realized, with a blush, that the creature's upper body had all the shapeliness of a woman's form – she wiped her lips with the back of her hand, and then rolled over onto her back, stretching her arms over her head. Her skin was mottled blue, vivid with scars and bruises. She flicked her tail in the water at the cave's entrance and dozed in the lull of the waves.

The young gentleman woke with a start. His limbs were numb from sitting so long in the one place, and he could tell by the sky that the day was well advanced. He looked down at the sea caves. The tangle of bladder wrack rose and fell, as it always had. There was no sign of the creature.

In the weeks that followed, his parents agreed that their son was greatly improved in his bodily health. His face glowed from the long hours spent outdoors by the sea every day, whatever the weather, and his appetite was hearty as a ploughman's. And while his mother had some concerns about his newly acquired taste for French brandy, his father was privately relieved that the boy was not quite such a milksop as he had feared. He was not the young man he had been, there was no doubt about that. He had no interest in society – indeed, he would shut himself away if anyone called at the house - but he seemed content, and that was enough for those who had his concerns at heart. One of the more fanciful kitchen maids was overhead saying that the young master had been bewitched, but she was just a foolish village girl, and was given a sound beating for her impertinence.

#flashfiction #mermaid

Curation

One of the criticisms of social media platforms such as Instagram is that they force users into a relentless self-curation of their lives, where every experience

becomes performative. And yet, participation does involve some ceding of control. The timeline can only travel in one direction. We have the power to delete the past, but we cannot reorder it, or go back to seed some subtle foreshadowing in the way we might do with a written narrative or a documentary.

In crafting and curating this article I could have given myself the freedom to reorder the sequence of my Instagram posts, but I took the decision to let them flow in their original chronological order. In this way they demonstrate the tidal charts of the project, and show the workings of the riptide of memory, the ebb and flow between realism and fantasy. However, I have been selective about the posts I have included here. They are interleaved with reflections and analysis, so that the readers of this article encounter the posts in a different context to followers who encounter them on Instagram. There's still more to be done, flash fictions to write: the little girl who walked off the edge of the swimming pool and sat at the bottom blinking at what she saw; the mermaid inexplicably chosen as a scapegoat by her own kind; the erotic travel memoir of a Regency roué, recalling his encounter with a mermaid in a Cartagena brothel-of-monstrosities. There are untrue facts to devise about freshwater mermaids. As I write there are two new seaweed vessels drying in the sunshine. I have plans for more fake artefacts, and ambitions to record conversations with strangers encountered at the coast about what draws them to the seashore.

Conclusion

As I look back to my original intentions for this experiment, I conclude that the project has led me to some discoveries:

- Code-switching proved to be an effective way of outwitting my conscious, distractible mind. In addition, I have found that when I switch between visual art and creative writing the physical making of the former feeds into the texture and sensory detail of the latter. By deliberately code-switching I was able to focus on one project while satisfying my desire for novelty and variety, because all the different elements and activities fed into one output. Regularly posting pieces on social media platforms became a form of action research, enabling me to develop my thinking on the project as it was in progress.

- As with the code-switching between visual art and creative writing, producing writing in different literary genres allowed me to explore different aspects of the overarching theme in a way that seemed to best suit each aspect, e.g. realist flash fiction when evoking scenes drawn from my own childhood.
- The lab book was a useful repository for planning and recording my activities and ensuring that I adhered to code-switching in an organised way. As someone who has never sustained a writer's journal for any length of time, the project-specific lab book proved a pragmatic alternative that fits better with my own creative methodology.

The multimodal experiment recounted in this article has energised my practice as a writer, making me bolder in using and adapting the storytelling tools and techniques that are at my disposal. Armstrong says, "A *real* writer and reader is someone who does not put limits on themselves because to do so stunts growth" (2014:6). Substitute "writer" with a broader, more inclusive term (maker, creator, artist, author?) and we have a succinct argument in support of multimodal practice as both an opportunity for growth, and a source of creative delight.

References

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