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## AN EXQUISITE-CORPSE: UNFOLDING SCARCITY USING ARTS-BASED AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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**Artist Statement:** *After 14 complex years, I message him: "I keep saving you and losing me." M hangs himself. Numbly I sit holding M's cold dead hand in my warm shaking one. I'm 33. A widow.* Twenty years on, and now a creative arts therapist/educator/researcher, I launched an arts-based autoethnographic (abr+a) quest to exhume and frankly face my role within my husband's suicide. Naively, I imagined cultivating an ecotone where self-care and care-for-other intra-act. Lured by this poietic methodological experiment, Scarcity-Gargoyle, however, sloped in— an inner-alter symbolising a trauma-response that had outlived its usefulness. Leading a motley crew of author, animangels, Darwin, and new material/posthumanists, it incited a gyroscopically-circling contemplation of trauma and scarcity, now folded into this *Exquisite Corpse* game. As this game unfurls, the question lingers within creases and crevices: What might these critters speak/sing/growl/howl/whisper/rasp to the lofty aspiration of crafting capacity for simultaneous compassionate becoming-with self *and* other?

**Keywords:** *trauma; arts-based research; creative arts therapy; posthumanism; scarcity; suicide*

## A Warning

I am beset by many words. A protective swarm, maybe. . . keeping other things at bay. But they do crowd in and take over. I have spent quite some time with the piece below, evicting words, attempting to render more accessible its offerings. I am left unsure, however, if what I am trying to express allows for this crisp clarity. And many of the words have stickily insisted on staying. I apologise, as this makes the work as dense and dark as quagmire to navigate.

But then, so is trauma.

And this work is about trauma. Facing it. Feeling it deeply. Staying with the trouble of it. Becoming response-able within it. Finding ways to care-fully create with|into|through it.

## In All Seriousness

*Wallace the bulldog, shut outside the room, whimpers and scratches at the door. M has hanged himself from the burglar-bars on a small window. It's low enough for him to stand—but he's used a constrictor knot that tightens irreversibly (The autopsy will find bruises on his throat where he struggled to break free of this noose). After the paramedics leave, I sit numb, holding his grey cold hand in my warm shaking one. (Musings on loss #1)*

## The Game Begins

Perched high on the parapet of my psyche lurks a gargoyle. My life is marked throughout by the troubling interferences of this internal-alter. The scaly-winged, slidey-eyed engineer of these interferences has, however, only now revealed itself through my art-making (Figure 1). I am in the throes of a compulsion to prise open the 20 plus-year-old crypt of my first-husband's suicide. And I assume Gargoyle materialised in response.

**Figure 1**  
*Scarcity-Gargoyle*



*Note:* Digital collage by Deborah Green, 2021.

My first-husband, M, and I shared each other's worlds for 14 complicated years. "I keep saving you and losing me," I finally messaged him in frustration. He killed himself. Horrified, I entombed these bitter words. But now, they are clawing to the surface, compelling me to own this telling utterance.

I feel an imagined elbow nudge me sharply. I eye-roll and chastise myself. My phrasing thus far may have ignited your empathy: "Poor her, widowed in her early 30s. . ." I have sucked on that woe-is-me teat for the past two decades. The tug now is more subterranean, to the darkness beneath the vault, slimy squirmings of my role within the

husband-suicide. Ghosts, I attempted to bury with him, are agitating.

### ***Preparing the Folds—All Games Need Some Structure***

As an academic and Research Coordinator for the School of Creative Arts Therapies, Whitecliffe College, Aotearoa New Zealand, I am called to engage in a respectable amount of research each year. When this inner urge began calling with increasing insistence, I framed this investigation of my role in M's death as a project, using arts-based research through autoethnography (abr+a)(Green, 2022; Green et al., 2022)—a worthy quest for a Creative Arts Therapy researcher committed to the advancement of poietic self-focused forms of inquiry. Maybe, by designating this as research, I imagined I would grant protection, permission, and credibility to this deeply personal quest. Maybe I felt it was time to join my students in the trenches where they were employing these methodologies to explore their own, often excruciatingly raw, lived/living experiences.

### ***Proposed Intentions***

My initial framing of this project leaned into my final words texted to M, words suggesting I could save/care for *either* him *or* me, not both. Gifting a critical slant to the (auto)ethnographic thread within my inquiry, I intended to illuminate cultural constructs of self-care. I imagined myself challenging my white-privileged-either/or fear of “losing me” by cradling it in soft hands alongside worldings (Haraway, 2016) that encourage me-because-of-we. This proposed directionality embraced collectivist constructs, such as *ubuntu* from my native Southern Africa, which in isiZulu refers to a philosophy emphasizing the interconnectivity of humans. And my new home in Aotearoa New Zealand offered *whanaungatanga*, which in te reo Māori encompasses kinship and connection, providing a sense of belonging. I hoped to facilitate a juxtaposition of individuated and collectivist orientations, allowing me to begin developing an ecotone (Kapitan, 2020; Strand in Science and Non- Duality, 2022) in which I may engage in simultaneous self-care and care-for-other.

The unexpected arrival of my inner Gargoyle disrupted these lofty intentions. Its calloused hands, and its skulking, skull-cradling, and scarcity-evoking presence rapidly recast my notion of a bucolic ecotone. As this concept of scarcity, represented by Gargoyle, gained traction, the ecotone—still a borderland offering tension and potential between two overlapping habitats—became more sepulchral, a liminal twilight zone.

Such post-proposal slippage is characteristic of how inviting the self and arts into research often lures the process from a well-lit path into shadows. Navigation through the mycelial meanderings that constitute this work might thus be helped by a peak into its evolution.

## ***Process Ponderings***

An itchy-urge led to the proposal mentioned above. A plunge into explorations followed, using *abr+a* blended with heuristics (Moustakas, 1990) and hermeneutics (Romanyshyn, 2007). Immersed in inquiry, stories and images surfaced and I captured them, free writing and creating in the snippety moments available within my brisk workload. These disparate arrivals felt connected but did not immediately reveal how. I did not push. Rather, I indwelt further by focusing into their felt-sense—an all-there-at-once pre-verbal sensory awareness (Rappaport, 2008). I wrote dislocated creative snatches, made digital collages, painted, drew, and modelled in plasticine. These visual-art creative endeavours differed from my prior *abr+a* excursions. Previously, the arts-making processes, materials and moment-to-moment experiences have offered, in themselves, significant insights (see for example, Green, 2018, 2020, 2021). This time, however, the core purpose of my creating seemed twofold. It opened undirected space for meandering ruminations that helped hold distressing sensations conjured by this exhumatory inquiry. It also externalised several satisfying images that accompanied me, on my mobile phone gallery, as I lived into this labour.

Finally saturated, I turned towards incubation and interpretation through entangled heuristic and hermeneutic spirals. I zig-zagged between further immersion and short periods of incubation that birthed “Something[s]” (Yunkaporta & Moodie, 2021, p. 91). I troubled these through reflexive writing-as-inquiry (Elizabeth, 2008) and by foraging relevant literature. Illumination and explication began emerging and I cycled insights back into my artwork, written words, felt-sense-focusing, dialoguing with my animangels (creative embodiments of my internal alters) (Green, 2015a, 2015b) and texts that resonated.

These parabolic indwelling-incubating-illuminating stages rhizomed out, diffractively connecting several oddities into the creative mix. As mentioned above, I was compelled to create and commune with the emergent fragment-of-self that whispered: “My name is Scarcity-Gargoyle” (Figures 1 & 6). This incited curiosity about the scarcity mindset (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013) as counterpoint to collectivist approaches to worlding. Seeking the origins of my scarcity-orientated saving-you/losing-me retort to  $\mathbb{M}$ , I scratched scabs off past life events. Two images became figural. Dark Soul-Caldera (Figure 7), embodying the impact of trauma, turned up while collaboratively exploring intersubjectivity with a therapist-supervisee. Coal-Snakes (Figure 8) captured and extended beyond my experience of menopause into the way I host difficult memories. Darwin’s “survival of the fittest” theory (Buitendijk, 2022) then entered the fray (Figure 10) and was quickly challenged by emergent relational ontologies within posthuman/new-materialist/indigenous-animist thinking (Haraway, 2016).

**Figure 2**  
*Creative Oddities Mix*



*Notes:* Digital collage by Deborah Green, 2024.

As for creative synthesis. . . much as I have yearned to smooth out this tangled shroud so I may extract from its crumpled pleats some wisdom to share with you, such an ambitious goal feels arrogant. This diffractively-reflexive, arts-driven crypt-exhumation hasn't yielded neatly packageable solutions and, given my mode of inquiry, is unlikely to do so.

### **Content Curations**

This written creation is thus my attempt to enfold this slew of emergent fragments into something much like the outcome of an Exquisite Corpse game. You know the one? Where the first person secretly draws a head, folds the paper, and passes it to the next, who adds a torso, and so on. When the drawing is finally unfolded, the whole mismatched but often quite astonishing creation emerges. And here this has led to an Igor-esque, evolving congealment with six folds, each appearing to host a central trauma-relevant state-of-being: Fold One: Gargoyle = protecting; Fold Two: Dark Soul-Caldera = wounding; Fold Three: Coal-Snakes =

tormenting; Fold Four: Scarcity = lacking; Fold Five: Darwin Disrupted = controlling; Fold Six: Unclenching = (re)imagining.

You are thus invited to wonder alongside me about fertile ways these folds—their process of coming-into-being and their contents—may speak/sing/growl/howl/whisper/rasp to our becoming-with self *and* other.

**Figure 3**  
*(Un)folded Echoes*



*Notes:* Digital collage by Deborah Green, 2024.

### **Fold One: Gargoyle**

The Scarcity-Gargoyle joins an ever-expanding menagerie of animangels within my psyche. In 2015, the term “animangels” scuttled into my self-as-subject explorations. I use it to reference my sub-personalities/parts/alters—as many take the form of creatures (Green, 2015a, 2015b, 2017). A metaxial (Falconer, 2011)

concatenation of “animals” and “angels”, this neologism positions these shards-of-self as denizens of an internal, dynamic betwixt-and-between worlding (Turner, 2019).

Hillman (1983) inspired the animal-element—rather than premature interpretation that hacks off the legs of images conjured by our psyche, we should let them run free. The angel-element derives from McNiff (2004) suggesting we treat our artworks as angels/messengers laden with useful insights. With a snarling “Cooeee”, Gargoyle joins my internal liminal tribe alongside the Contractive-Crocodile (Figure 4 & 9), Creative-Cat, Trickster-Magpie, Teddybear-Sage (Figure 5), my Wild-Child, my Threshold Orphan (Figure 10), a treeful of Mind-Monkeys, and a Barbwire-Heart-with-Wings (Green, 2015b; 2017). Each of these contrary critters has its own onto-epistemological (Gerber et al., 2020) whakapapa<sup>1</sup> raggedly stitched into the often-tattered fabric of my herstory (Morgan, 1970).

**Figure 4**  
*Vampy-Croc*



*Notes:* Paper clay and ash by Deborah Green, 2015a, p. 156. *Vampy-Croc*

**Figure 5**  
*Shy-Sage*



*Notes:* Paper clay and ash by Deborah Green, 2015a, p. 170.

Gargoyle grips the guttering high in my selfing with a screechy chitter of crampon-claws, slitted eyes scanning for potential threat. My professional understanding of trauma, gathered over years of practising therapy, suggests this most recent animangel was birthed to protect me. And yet, at the personal level, since it took form in this inquiry, I have had to engage some careful self-compassioning to protect myself from it. I sense that it slouched, sticky and venomous, into my DNA through ancestral trauma (my forebears seem to have lived richly rollicking but raggedy lives). It has supped upon the toxic culture I was born into, the hot raw friction of my parents' struggles, and my own adverse experiences. Throughout my life, I have been aware of a competitive and aggressive but hitherto unnamed part of me whispering in my heart and mind—belittling others through racism and sexism, classism and educational elitism.

**Figure 6**  
*Scarcity-Gargoyle in the Wild*



*Notes:* Digital collage by Deborah Green, 2021.

**Figure 7**  
*Dark Soul-Caldera*



*Notes:* Paint on paper by Deborah Green, 2021.

As I matured, I began interrogating and suppressing these toxic inclinations. Rather than being banished from my psyche, however, Gargoyle's arrival in this inquiry suggests these nastinesses calcified far beyond their initial reactive attempts to keep me safe from harm.

*Hands that keep me safe are gentle and firm. I recall how M and I held hands in bed at night. I often would wake to the comfort of our interlaced fingers. (Musings on loss #2)*

## **Fold Two: Dark Soul-Caldera**

*Maybe we're born shiny and new. Then life begins bumping into us. Cracks appear. Cracks that let the dark in. Dark that—left untended—puddles pools coagulates, implodes. Dark that can birth monsters. Opening my clenched hands, I try to gently cup monsters. (Musings on loss #3)*

I am in session with a creative arts therapist I supervise. She is inquiring into ways clients burrow under her skin and linger in her body. "What is this?" she wonders. "Is this safe for them? Is this safe for me?" As she surrounds this querulous theme with various media—fossicking in the sandtray, painting, drawing, and writing—I lean into a parallel response-art process (Fish, 2012). Opening myself to poiesis (Levine, 2009), I let the music she has chosen to accompany us wash through me. My conscious cognition becomes witness, tracking what is flowing onto the page, attending without interpreting, noticing colours and brushstrokes, changes in my breath, arrivings and shiftings of bodily sensation. . . My image-making begins with a fleshy sphere, yellow finds itself encircling this and white comes in, softening the yellow. I glow inside, embodiment matching this light-filled image. But no, the artwork tells me sternly, "I am incomplete. Black!" I do not want black. It will screw up the floating shimmering glow. I linger on the cusp for as long as the urgent image permits. . . but then, taking a breath, I plunge into the darkness. Black quickly fills the central untouched mandala. It is turgid, thick, sticky, opaque. It pushes my brush out, piercing the pale-fleshy boundary circle, tentacles and tendrils questing, cracking open the pristine primrose. Red drops fall blood-like from my brush and the work is complete. I am shaken and murky. Something has found its way into the world via me. It feels like it might fuck in unhelpful ways with this session's inquiry into intra-subjectivity (Barad, 2007) and sympoiesis (Haraway, 2016)

Sidestepping what I have created, we commune with her work. Eventually, we return from sandtray to art-table where this malignant black eye awaits. She pounces upon it, requesting my interpretations. My words and this image are not yet acquainted so she offers her wonderings. She suggests it is a reversal of what she brought into the session, evoking what may happen when our own darkness leaks

into our clients. . . Yes. Oh yes. . . what is wounded in me may be harmful to others.

It takes weeks and several layers of this inquiry before this image names itself Dark Soul-Caldera, referencing the large cavity formed when a volcano erupts and collapses (National Geographic, 2022). An image of the internal explosions and collapses of my trauma, causing Gargoyle to rasp, “Dead or just dormant?”

*We curl into each other at night. I awake. My hand is numb, trapped beneath the weight of his sleeping body. (Musings on loss #4)*

### **Fold Three: Coal-Snakes**

This exploration is excavating through sedimented layers of my herstory as my body engages in the alchemy of menopause. I am sleepless, in transition, beset by raging heat and rampant agitation. Threshing deep in the fretful bowels of yet another restless night, braced against these sensations, I pause. A soft eruption of realisation occurs: I spend my waking hours with clients/students/supervisees espousing the creative need to stay with the trouble (Haraway, 2016) and focus into (Rappaport, 2008) the various vagaries of our human existence. Yet, plagued with my own travails, I scamper into avoidance. “Duh!” I think. Settling into the puddle of sweat- tangled sheets, I reach inwards. What is the felt-sense (Rappaport, 2008) of these so called *hot flushes*? I attend, compassionately, without judgement, with deep curiosity, setting aside preconceived notions. . . I notice tingles of agitation, dark purple in the pit of my belly. These radiate a subtle but distinct buzz throughout my body. My arms reach up and out, legs kick free of the bedding. I sprawl, a starfish on burning sand, staked-out, my hot flesh sizzling against icy winter night air. The furnace builds, accompanied by an all-too-familiar upswell of horror, shame, and anguish. Riding this tide are sharp-tongued memories come to harangue me.

*We’re attempting to escape his anger and depression by road-tripping, camping under African stars. I awake to him shaking. I reach for his hand. He snatches it away and hunches in on himself. I feel rejected and pissed-off. (Musings on loss #5)*

Despite every fibre resisting, I stay with these sensations—sweating, gazing inward—and ask for a symbol to help me better understand. I am plunged into the Soul-Caldera, the place hosting blackness within me. Here two notions await: *snakes* and *coal*. “Snakes and coal?” I query. Yes. Snakes that have been compacted by avoidance and suppression until their entangled scaly bodies fossilised into dense lumps of black coal (Figure 8). They are furious and very much alive. Each hot flush begins when this Coal-chunk, low in my belly, pivots, its super-heated face rolling upward. This galvanises the Snakes. They pulse, each reptilian

body holding a slither of trauma—an agonising or shameful or humiliating memory of experiences in which I suffered loss, was harmful to another, revealed myself as stupid and worthy of ridicule, or I was rejected and felt worthless. . .

**Figure 8**  
*Coal-Snakes*



*Note:* Digital collage by Deborah Green, 2021.

This imagery potently evokes the felt-sense of my hot flushes: As the throbbing Coal radiates excruciating heat throughout my physical body, the unfettered memories from the Snakes inject poison into my heart and mind, tormenting me with juddering feelings of utmost doom, dread, disgrace. I am a speck of filth, a piece of shit, a fucking molecule of nastiness unworthy of breath. . .

Yet, observing my struggle against submersion beneath this fetid tide of disgust, I become alert to this self that watches. And. . . yes, here is a flicker, a teaspoon of light, the smidgeon of me that is apart from this contaminated sludge of self-hatred: my witness-self, my wise-self, my I/eye in the midst of the storm (Allen, 1995; Rappaport, 2008).

*I dissociate during my father's funeral. M's steady hand in mine anchors me and brings me home. (Musings on loss #6)*

### **When Folds Scrunch into Snake-stories**

My witness-self closely observes the memory-Snakes, spying several hissing happenings that, agglomerating over the span of my herstory, warped my response-ability into scarcity-shaped reactivity. What follows below is a sternly pared-back rendition to create context. Fulsome telling of these tales may feed excuse-mongering, igniting the woe-is-me-ness that I am attempting to trouble.

[It's also vital here for me to sidetrack into a wee grapple with ethics centred around the query: *Is it ok to story-tell about those who can no longer speak for themselves?* Winkler (2018) sets the stage, writing "whatever autoethnographers do in terms of addressing ethical concerns within their research, there is no simple solution, no one best way, and definitely no holy grail available" (p. 242). This becomes even more squirrely when the dead enter the fray. While attention has been paid to protecting the living, the ethical implications inherent in researching the stories of the dead have received less consideration. Some common ethical principles pertaining to referencing living participants in autoethnographic studies—such as gaining informed consent and member checking—cannot be applied to the dead. Other principles, however, deserve contemplation—including the (im)possibility of anonymity and confidentiality, the ownership of stories, doing no harm by carefully considering representations of self and others, and not underestimating the afterlife of a published narrative (Sparkes, 2024; Tullis, 2022). Exploring the ethical implications when referencing stories of the recently deceased, Caswell and Turner (2021) suggest possible harm and reputational damage should be addressed by honouring the right of the deceased and those left behind to be treated with respect and dignity. If it is wrong to reveal something about a living person, then it would also

be wrong to reveal it about a dead person, offers a practical rule of thumb (Scarre, 2013). Therefore, while understanding ourselves and our world is facilitated by learning from those who lived and died before us (Black & MacRaild, 2007), when making disclosures about deceased individuals, it is crucial that their privacy and reputation are considered and balanced against any public interest (Caswell & Turner 2021). In carefully navigating, using these notions, I also embrace Barad's (2007) suggestion that we become-with together and this entanglement means it is impossible to extricate ourselves from ethical concerns. Every morning, therefore, I end my yoga ritual to wake body and soul by inviting my dead-ones to journey with me through the day. And now, I ask my dead-mother, dead-father, dead-husband if I may tell of them, owning these are my thoughts/opinions/perspectives, not theirs. And I ask you, as reader, please hold this work gently. Know I do not speak *for* them, I express my own experiences. If they were here, there would be no need for this telling.]

*Snake#1 (1939-1945):* Though evacuated from London, my teenage mother sneaks home to ride ambulance during the Blitz. My young father joins the South African army and fights in Italy and Egypt. He returns with shrapnel scars and a habit of measuring distances between thumb and forefinger with one eye closed. He says this was how they aimed weapons in the desert.

*Snake#2 (1960-68):* My parents meet at the ex-pat Happy Valley-esque Roan Antelope Copper Mine, Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia). I arrive in a torrent of my mother's blood, almost killing her.

*Snake#3 (1970):* We make a stressful move to South Africa to avoid increasing tension on the mine.

*Snake#4 (1972-73):* My mother battles breast cancer. I am not told. I conclude she is distant and sometimes absent because I have done something wrong. My stressed little body develops cold sores and warts; an agonising eye-disease lingers for a year, causing hospitalisations and fears of blindness; the night terrors loiter much longer.

*Snake#5 (1973. . .):* My mother adapts poorly to racist, sexist, and misogynist life in South Africa. She sinks into what I now recognise as clinical depression. She never fully emerges.

*Snake#6 (1984-5):* My brother is hollowed out fighting the brutal Border War during his two-year compulsory military conscription.

*Snake#7 (1986. . .):* Despite being at university an hour away, my mother

and I develop a strange but sustaining friendship. I return home every weekend. My father and brother tell me she is only happy when I am home.

*Snake#8 (1990. . . )*: I am embroiled in HIV/AIDS work and begin awakening, my white privilege shining starkly amidst the apartheid shadows I encounter in South African townships.

*Snake#9 (1994. . . )*: I meet M. He takes me rock climbing. I am not sure which I love more. My weekends become increasingly absorbed by M and climbing. I neglect my mother.

*Snake#10 (1996 January)*: My mother is diagnosed with lung cancer.

*Snake#11 (1996 February)*: My father and brother are attacked and shot. My father is murdered. My brother is paralysed.

*Snake#12 (1996 September)*: My mother dies.

*Snake#13 (1997. . . )*: M and I marry. From her deathbed, my mother had instructed him: “Look after her.” This is his way. Our marriage is a blend of delight and despair. Sometimes, we are playful and vivid. But I am also dark, trauma-edged and controlling; and he is dark, trauma-edged and irresponsible.

*Sometimes I get confused and need to look carefully to remind myself which are his hands, and which are mine. (Musings on loss #7)*

*Snake#14 (2001)*: M hangs himself.

## **Fold Four: Scarcity**

I ponder the entangled whakapapa of these emerging images and animangels. The Dark Soul-Caldera spawned the Coal-Snakes. The Coal-Snakes whelped Gargoyle—conceived from their desire to keep me safe. Over time it has, like them, become stuck. It holds me hostage within a worlding alert to the threat of scarcity in every interaction. I gauge my felt-sense in the presence of this Gargoyle. There is void, sucking vacuum of yearning, ache of envy and need. It raspingly reminds me: “I’m Scarcity-Gargoyle.”

I focus in upon *scarcity*. Bisser (2015) frames scarcity as “the state of being or feeling without or not having enough of something” (para. 4). She contrasts this with abundance, with knowing you are enough and you will have enough, “feeling excitement, positivity, and hopefulness in life. It creates light instead of dark and

puts air beneath the wings of an idea or feeling” (para.3). I am white, privileged, and middle-class. Surely this *is* abundance? This denies me any right to claim scarcity?

And yet, this description of abundance is the antithesis of how I felt in my marriage with M. Our relationship came to feel dark, airless, and wingless—a paradoxical simultaneity of material abundance and emotional scarcity. Covey (2020) coined the term *scarcity mentality*, referencing ways we may see life as a finite pie—if one individual snaffles a large slice, everyone else gets less. Princeton psychologist Shafir (2013) explored how perceived deprivation wreaks havoc on cognition and decision-making—our minds are less efficient when we feel we lack something.

Shafir and Mullainathan (2013) state the scarcity mindset consumes mental bandwidth, possibly leading to preoccupations that impose ongoing cognitive deficits and reinforce self-defeating actions. Huijsmands et al. (2019) use neuroimaging to suggest that a scarcity mindset impacts neural mechanisms underlying goal-directed decision making, and that the effects of scarcity are largest when they are compared with previous situations when resources were abundant.

Was I harbouring a sense of scarcity? Had my security, certainty, and trust in the world been steadily strip-mined by formative experiences of my mother’s cancer, my awakening to apartheid’s brutal inequity, my parents’ deaths, the maiming of my brother? Was this consuming my mental bandwidth?

Gargoyle and I circle this thought, contemplating the relationship between trauma and the scarcity-mindset. Contemporary trauma research identifies four core responses to perceived life-threatening experiences: freeze, fight, flight, and fawn/feign (Malchiodi, 2020). I am well-acquainted with how the residue of my embodied trauma chooses to manifest. In an early autoethnography (Green, 2010), I called for a symbol to help me explore my experience of creative block (Hillman, 1983). This acquainted me with my internal cold-blooded Crocodile (Figure 8). This close relative of my primal reptilian brain enabled me to explore my contract-and-freeze response (Malchiodi, 2020).

**Figure 9**  
*Contractive-Crocodile*



My Crocodile shares its reptilian nature with Gargoyle and Coal-Snakes, linking them all with my survival-orientated lizard brain (Levine, 2010)—yet these new arrivals seem feistier. When my family tumbled into tragedy and I tumbled into numbing freeze, M was a stalwart support. As time passed my numbing thawed, his own demons resurfaced and my fight clawed awake. I cast M as competitor, believing there was only so much support-in-distress to go around, that I owned the larger claim to trauma and thus my need was more compelling. I viewed him as impinging, gobbling up the attention, love, and care that was *my* due. Is this Gargoyle overruling the Crocodile, fight overcoming freeze to infuse our marriage with a There-Can-Be-Only-One mindset?

*When I first begin climbing, he laughs and tests my finger-strength, his fingers hooked into mine and pulling. My hands open easily. He does this regularly as I steadily grow stronger. Finally, he pulls as hard as he can, but my hands are locked. (Musings on loss #8)*

## ***A Land Rover, a Desert, and a Death Story in the Crumples***

This lack-of- space-for-two escalated in the year preceding M's death, spinning us off on a journey.

[May I tell this story, M?

I feel it embodies the mix of magic and misery that was us.]

*M and I set off on a once-in-a-lifetime road-trip exploring Africa in Mildred, our ancient Land Rover. M's dream, this trip initially filled me with dread. But I could see he was struggling to stay afloat in the mundane that'd become his working life. We therefore resigned, asked friends to care for our menagerie of dogs and cats, and set off. Still tightly entombed in grief over my parents' deaths and brother's disabling, I watched astonished as I unclenched. I softened into the delicious unpredictability of our meandering pace, the big skies, cheese and tomato toasties from roadside stops, the far horizon, crawling into the tent at night, lulled to sleep by sounds of a campsite winding down and the bush coming alive. Each evening, while crickets whirred and night birds chattered and the wide deep African dusk settled over me, I'd sit in a pool of yellow light drinking cider and clickety-clacking on my old manual typewriter. When I revisit these pages-upon-pages of rackety writings, they yodel with joy and discovery. There are few mentions of the black pit of crawling that came alive in M. . . (his own Dark Soul-Caldera, maybe?) He'd craved this trip, yet it overwhelmed him. He became increasingly silent, skittering us from place to place, a hurry-up-and- move-on that honed my tent-pitching skills. Any lingering triggered him. He slept poorly and snarled a lot. Finally, it seethed out, a bitter spew of criticism directed at me. No quarter was spared and all of me was found wanting. And much rang true. To my shame, I'd claimed the right to be emotionally centre-stage in our relationship because: "Can't you see I'm suffering!" I was controlling, judgey, full of FOMO (fear of missing out), emotionally distant, competitive. I sat on the hot sand in the deserted campsite outside Luderitz and, sobbing in disgrace and confusion, wailed, "Why didn't you tell me this earlier?" And yet I knew he'd tried. And his words had fallen upon inhospitable hyper-defended ground. After an hour, he was drained, and I'd cried myself into a sunburnt swollen-eyed heap.*

*And on we went, juddering over corrugated desert roads to climb sand-dunes at dawn in Sossusvlei and explore cool wet canyons at Sesriem. A petty squabble over quad-biking in Swazopmund loosened another tirade, and M decided he'd had enough—of me and of the trip. I gazed hungrily up the length of Africa. I wasn't yet ready to leave. I packed a backpack and waved goodbye to M and Mildred as they chuntered off towards home. That night in the small campsite hut, awash with elation and horror, I listened as barking geckos punctured the darkness.*

*He couldn't do it. He found me the following day drinking coffee and writing postcards at a small café under a rampant grapevine. And on we went, but with a compromise—a shorter trip. Two weeks to get home via the Cape brought acres of Spring wildflowers outside Clanwilliam, sun-drenched climbing on glorious golden sandstone at Wolfberg Cracks, camel rides in Oudtshoorn. . .*

*Back home, we rattle on for another year, but something is cracked. Any juice still left is leaking out. Then, after what I experience as a mundane argument, M moves out. The next several weeks are a confused tangle. I seem to be faring better than M. He's voicing violent suicidal fantasies of using Mildred's winch to wrench his body in half. This rips into my soul. I'm warming to my new-found freedom; I'm anguished for him. Desperate, I suggest we attempt to repair our marriage. He agrees. The next day he calls, furious, accusing me of trickery. And so, stung, I text Those Words, the "when I choose you, I lose me" words.*

*An hour later he's dead.*

*I bury this new darkness deep, another slow erupting volcano, another caldera, another crypt for Gargoyle to guard.*

### ***Crumpled Creases of Affective and Connective Scarcity***

This inquisition is making Gargoyle fractious. Now I have noticed its presence and communed with it through arts-making and writing, it feels (re)triggered, whispering, whispering. It hisses: "What's with this entitled, selfish whining about scarcity while cushioned within white, middle-class, material abundance?" I writhe. . . but also bristle about how powerfully these thoughts work to silence me. Leaning into this new shadow, I prickle with deep disquiet when I consider ways material abundance may intra-act with emotional/soulful impoverishment. I become inquisitive about how my Western-lineage created conditions for this ecotonal friction where material privilege and psychological indigence rub the skin off each other (Strand in Science and Non-Duality, 2022). This invites curiosity about the role played by epigenetics and introjection in Gargoyle's ancestry. What did it (and I) inherit/learn from my parents?

[I quietly ask their permission/(forgiveness?) as I fumble into voicing the impact upon me of my lived experience of their relationship.]

Leaning in, I sense there was not enough space within their marriage for them to flourish simultaneously. I ponder their generation's privileging of patriarchy that shaped marriages around the man. I wonder about their experiences of World War II. My mother whole-heartedly embraced her freedom as a young woman in London,

riding shifts on ambulances and later toiling as part of the Land Army. This agency to determine her own life-path was steadily eroded after she married—especially when my brother and I began staking claims to the already limited relational-space. I am awash with sorrow at the bitterness cultivated in her by incarceration in this mid-twentieth century identity as wife and mother.

This, I speculate, offers insight into my version of scarcity in which I have rationed giving and receiving love/attention/validation. There it is in my marriage with M: a toxic mirroring of my mother's patriarchy-patterned, scarcity-stained shaping of the male-female dyad—cauterised into a distorting belief that if one gets love/acclaim/praise/comfort/support, then the other is left wanting. With a shudder, I now recall conversations with a friend, in which I referred to my marriage as “airless,” saying, “There's not enough space for us both.” I was eager to blame M for taking up this space. Now I query: Was there really a scarcity of emotional space?

[Were you, M, a man who claimed all the space as yours?

Honestly? No.

You were unique—you and patriarchy don't really belong in the same sentence.]

This fictitious scarcity of emotional space now feels like an unhelpful introject of my parents' relationship. I ache as I ponder this. Spirals of DNA loop from this tangled family history through the Scarcity-Gargoyle. My own trauma-generating experiences further endow it with wings and claws and steely-eyed determination. Through gritted teeth, I acknowledge its determination has always been to protect me, just as stone gargoyles direct rainwater away from the walls of valued buildings to protect brick, stone, and mortar from harm. Like any trauma-response that outstays its welcome, however, Gargoyle is now just stuck and trying to survive. And, as it has Darwinian inclinations, it will fight tooth and nail.

## **Fold Five: Darwin Disrupted**

Trauma theories suggest humans have four core survival responses to threat: freeze, fight, flight, and fawn/feign (Malchiodi, 2020). I have previously communed with my Contractive-Crocodile as a way to research my freeze-response. Gargoyle could be interpreted as my fight-response. This fight in me manifests as fury. This fury leaks out as blame. And blame needs to be laid—but upon whom? In a binary world, it is either him or me. Feeling blamed ignites terror in me (the child who is to blame for her mother's cancer yells from within my bones). Gargoyle swooped in, turning terror to anger. I thus blamed M for his suicide. I held him responsible for making his own world so inhospitable he had no option but to vacate. Oh, how very powerfully I had internalised capitalism, and its Darwinian

survival of the fittest philosophy which divides the world into winners and losers, the strong and the weak, blaming individuals for their own struggles (Figure 10).

### Figure 10

*When the battle is lost and won: The Threshold Orphan*



*Notes:* Digital collage by Deborah Green, 2021.

I focus on Darwin, who has now infiltrated this inquiry. Buitendijk (2022) believes Darwinian philosophy is still too dominant in our thinking, and “it’s getting in the way of societal progress through collaboration” (para. 1). The concept that “people are naturally driven towards chasing individual gains at the expense of others. . . often goes unchallenged” (para. 2). Darwin’s reasoning appears saturated with pre-Victorian social values, including belief in competition, which he then applied to nature. Buitendijk (2022) writes that, when competition is central within human society, it enforces the notion of scarcity, increasing the sense of threat and stress which affects individual wellbeing. And yet, during the last half-century, an overwhelming majority of biologists have challenged the notion of competition for survival as the main driver behind evolutionary success, and are instead pointing at myriad examples of very intricate collaborative systems within and between species that help them evolve and thrive. (para. 6)

As a manifestation of my will to survive, Gargoyle feels very Darwinian. It simultaneously tries to suppress toxic memories while ensuring the circumstances that spawned them are never repeated. It blunders through my psyche, a blind and clumsy paradox. Its hyper-vigilance to potential threat, its attempts to avoid or

control relationships in which it feels I might be exploited, its attempts to place me first/central/above to garner the love/attention/support it deems I require to survive—these all position me to repeat the behaviours and re-experience the circumstances that birthed Gargoyle in the first place.

*Our hands are sweating. I let go of his hand to wipe the sweat off mine. When I reach to take his hand again, he's moved out of reach. (Musings on loss #9)*

## **Fold Six: Unclenching**

The trumpeting arrival of Darwin sends me scurrying in search of contemporary enquirers who might help me reimagine the tight tangles into which I have contorted myself. Thinkers who encourage an expanded range of play by opening options that disrupt isolating will-to-power, decentring humans and recognising our entanglement within the ecology of all. My journey with these new companions is emergent, but I shush chittering Gargoyle and offer a few. Sheldrake (2021) invites Gargoyle and me to burrow beneath the loam and spread beyond rampant me-first individualism as we compost with mycelium and fungi. Akomolafe (in Forest, 2020; in Science and Non-Duality, 2022) calls us to get lost generously within a world that will always exceed us, and invites mispronunciation to open cracks for the arrival of new gods. Haraway (2016) encourages us to stay with the trouble, open to ongoingness, and to recognise our tentacularity. Strand (in Science and Non-Duality, 2022) ushers us into rewilding, reminding us we are not ourselves, we host more non-human than human cells in our corporal beings, we entangle beyond the small spark of consciousness named me/I by our cultural-conditioning.

Let us gaze back over this labour using, as a lens, the sense of these invitations. Remember how, in tracing my exasperated utterance about “saving-him/losing-me,” I hoped to gently hold my isolating individualism up against collectivist constructs that provide a sense of kinship through me-because-of-we? The agency of this inquiry, however, informed me that, rather than cultivate a fertile ecotone where self-care and care-for-other may co-habit, I was already in a liminal betwixt-and-between quite different to the nature-based wholesome one I yearned for. This coagulated into Gargoyle, trailing images of exhumations, crypts, shrouds, snakes, and dark holes in my soul. Even within this Poe-esque twilight, however, thinking-with relationality allows me to notice my deep (though reluctant) gratitude. Digging into my felt-sense of who and how I was *then*, I am heartened by so many differences to me *now*. Rather than gussy this troubling tale in rainbows, I am now able to dig in and stay with the trouble—to unearth places of festering, to tolerate slippery shadows and claws, to whisper soothingly to my splinters-of-self.

*. . . and yes, gazing down I see I do have unclenching hands gentle enough to more tenderly hold this, myself and M, in our complex compostings. (Musings on loss #10)*

I have plumbed places of deep abiding pain, wounds still raw, anger yet simmering, throbbing loss. . . and I have been granted breath, pockets of clarity, mycelial connectivity, and a deep humming love. I have stumbled over some partially illuminating theories and discarded others that felt airless. I have found complexity, contradiction, murkiness. . . and flecks of magic.

## A Tentative Unfolding

As we slow to a pause, let me again attempt to set aside my love-affair with the both-and-*and* of slippery words, and lay bare some bones unearthed during these excavations. These bones have hissed and growled to us of travels through trauma— of protecting, wounding, tormenting, lacking, and controlling. But now, these bones are casting themselves into clusters, singing to us of reimagining

**Figure 11.**



*Notes:* Digital collage by Deborah Green, 2021

### ***Cluster#1 Traversing Troubling Terrain***

Engaging the arts to explore the culture-of-self within research and therapy, offers ways of holding tortuous, painful, and shameful material. This invites the dark and difficult to speak by providing thickly described, useful insights into experiences that might otherwise be inaccessible. Staying with the trouble and letting the arts lead have stretched my capacity for rhizomatic poetic processual ways of working that carried me into unexpected knowings. While the arts can be refuges for recovery, they can also diffract and offer us new ways into old ideas and calcified stories.

### ***Cluster#2 Methodological Holding***

I wonder if some of my yearning for a more reciprocal interweaving of self-care and care-for-other—a vital necessity for any psychotherapist—led me to arts-based autoethnography in the first place. At a meta-level, this process became a methodological experiment (Fleming, 2020; Green et al., 2022), offering an unexpectedly literal answer to my initial query: *Might abr+a help cultivate a fertile ecotone where self-care and care-for-other overlap?* Held within the curious and reflexive hands of this study, I was able to engage in a form of self-care while exploring the ripples within my professional work. Perhaps the methodology itself has gone some way towards enacting my initial proposed intention by creating a container for the cultivation of a personal-professional intra-action of care-for-self-and-other?

### ***Cluster#3 Complex Ethics***

This process pushed me to dwell close-in with ethics, carefully considering how I might tell my stories without dishonouring those who could not give conventional consent. I thus sincerely thank those I imagine as hovering in the ether alongside me as I grappled. I hope they know I offer this with love and gentleness and that the telling might have traction for others.

### ***Cluster#4 Mycelial Healing***

I am experiencing palpable relief at exposing this dark material to the air, and believing time is non-linear feeds my imagining that I am sending healing back to the deceased who are woven into my telling.

## ***Cluster#5 Scarcity Shared***

This inquiry began with me imagining that, in creatively contemplating the complex ethnography of my me-first worlding, I might smooth the crumples, pleats and folds in the shroud I pulled from deeply buried wounds. I was, however, cast sideways into examining the implications of a scarcity mindset. Tracking this within my personal relationships, I realise how steeped I am, even now, in capitalist, individualist, scarcity-infused worlding. These constructs are parasitically interwoven with my very sense of survival. And I wonder how this may resonate for others. I thus invite you to consider how we—professional artists/researchers/therapists/teachers—who are embroiled in so-called Western cultures may understand and orientate to the insidious construct of scarcity within our working and worlding.

## ***Cluster#6 What Is Yet to Come***

The arrival of new materialist/posthuman/Indigenous animist orientations enlivened this exploration—and I encourage fellow inquirers and therapists to lean into these relational ontologies. I feel a frisson when I imagine how these may offer more apt ways to think-with the potent entanglements of arts and healing.

## **Tentatively, a Place to Breathe and Compost**

I softly close this piece by acknowledging I am unable to honour my initial intention to fully embrace the collectivist models-of-being that read beautifully and songfully. My Darwin-esque Contractive-Crocodile and Scarcity-Gargoyle, my Coal-Snakes and Dark Soul-Caldera need time, more befriending gentleness and compassion to learn to hold hands with each other, with me, and with these emergent-yet-ancient theories. Perhaps, however, in the robust belly of diffractively-reflexive creative inquiry, during which I render myself purposefully vulnerable (Holman Jones et al., 2016), I may continue to strengthen ways to simultaneously offer myself love while gifting *ukuthanda*<sup>2</sup> and *aroha*<sup>3</sup> to others. Then maybe we will begin to become-with a worlding that exceeds us, that embraces wounding alongside notions of care, support, love, and acceptance as exponential and capable of stretching, multiplying, unfolding, and deepening as desired and required.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Te reo Māori term encompassing spiritual and physical genealogy.

<sup>2</sup> isiZulu for “love”.

<sup>3</sup> Te reo Māori for “love”.