

Reflection Statement

between my body and my self

are too many thoughts for words.¹

Our intellects are drawn to structure, labels and division. We dissect ourselves into body and mind, foreign and familiar; dissect our relationships into host and parasite; our world into natural and artificial.

These divisions are comfortable, but deceptive.

The world relies on the blurring of these lines. Humans encompass millions of microorganisms, bacteria and fungi without which we could not draw sustenance from our food, could not be nourished. All organisms function in a complex symbiosis with their surroundings; nothing can exist separately — not in a biological sense, nor psychological.

We must connect. We must depend. These are the inevitable conditions of existence. Until we accept them, our relationship to our bodies, to our earth, to each other, will remain fractured.

Composure reflects on the course of this relationship. It seeks to capture the experience of merging, to demonstrate viscerally, through poetry, what we cannot intellectually understand — how two people become one; how a body may be fully

¹ *Composure*, page 5

inhabited rather than subdued and controlled, as our intellects demand it should be;
how an organism may be part of a greater whole.

It rejects the classical notion of a split between physicality and spirituality, depicting
the *Zerrissenheit*, psychological fragmentation and turmoil, that results:

*We reach our hands up, trace the bones we share,
pull at the flesh we do not. I push my hands into her
and prise her skin apart²*

And the freedom that comes with acceptance of their coexistence:

*[We] dance, encircling creatures in the light
Of our reactions, lift our feet and press
Into the full, distended world...*

— *despite*

The wildness in our movement, we are blessed.³

In this, *Composure* presents an argument most often held by science, and those who understand the world empirically: we are no more or less than our bodies. During the early stages of my research, I focused on the science of the gut microbiome and its influence on emotional experiences — a simultaneously fascinating and unsettling link between nature, our bodies, and our minds. The raw scientific studies on potential correlations between low gut biodiversity and mental illness were intriguing, yet I was

² *Composure*, page 5

³ *Composure*, page 19

more significantly influenced by subjective works, such as *First, We Make the Beast Beautiful*, by Australian author Sarah Wilson⁴; a loosely structured and emotionally powerful book that introduced me to *Zerrissenheit*, and brought my focus to the notions of wholeness, fragmentation, and intrinsic symbiosis and conflict.

While my research began with scientific inquiry, the voice of the work has gravitated to that of the Romantic period, venerating Nature and spirituality, and rejecting the clinical, emotionless voice of neo-Classicism and science. As our natural world retreats, and the suffocating artificial environment of industrialisation and urbanisation grows ever more vast and broken, the Romantic world view becomes increasingly relevant in prompting us to reconnect with Nature, the wilderness, and our environment: our perceived disconnect is a significant source of tension in *Composure*. Expanding the work's perspective from the individual, *Connation*⁵ personifies the Earth. She laments the fragmentation of an ecosystem, the brokenness of humanity's relationship with her — one of exploitation, conflict, and power imbalance. As I wrote, fires burned above the arctic circle, a terrifying realisation of the immense damage humanity is inflicting on their home:

Your feet make brutal love to my skin, skin

Of moss and lichen.

You step through me.

take me into your burning chest, chest

⁴ Sarah Wilson, *First, We Make the Beast Beautiful*, Pan Macmillan, 2017

⁵ Definitions draw from those of *The Concise Macquarie Dictionary, 6th Edition*, Pan Macmillan, 2013

*and I splinter*⁶

Using the echoing rhythm of a traditional Icelandic lullaby, sung by a dead child to her mother⁷, Earth sings her own dirge, haunting the responder and reminding them of her omnipresence:

*Lover of mine, do not fear, fear,
I am your ground, I am here,
Here in the world of the dead, dead.*⁸

Minute features of the language in *Composure* are deeply linked to its meaning, as above, and in the use of the sonnet form to begin each section. The sonnet is a potent and complex structure, one that at once constricts and amplifies the emotional course of the relationship between the persona and her lover. Using Elaine Hamilton and John Livingston's textbook *Form and Feeling*⁹ as a guide, I experimented with several variations, using both the Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnet, and at times blending the two. The challenge of shaping emotional turmoil into fourteen rigid lines was evident in the study of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*¹⁰, a work that perfectly articulated both restraint and passion, and created a deeply moving emotional narrative. Her struggle to maintain her sense of self while expressing her love,

⁶ *Composure*, page 10

⁷ 'Moðir mín í kví, kví', R Fidler and K Gíslason, *Sagaland*, HarperCollinsPublishers Australia, 2017

⁸ *Composure*, page 11

⁹ E Hamilton and J Livingston, *Form and Feeling: Poetry for Senior Students*, Longman Cheshire, 1986

¹⁰ E Barret Browning, edited by J R Bolton and J Holloway, *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems*, Penguin Books Australia, 1995

*I cannot teach
My hand to hold my spirit so far off
From myself^{d1}*

and the conflicted emotions that marked her courtship with Robert Browning, formed the foundation for much of my persona's relationship: unlike *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, however, *Composure* depicts a total merging of the two lovers, an enmeshment. The poem *að breytast* derives its title from the Icelandic verb for 'to change', altered to middle voice — a grammatical form that implies both reflexive and direct action. The two lovers are *að breytast*, changing simultaneously themselves, and each other; they are connate.

In the midst of all these linguistic curiosities, biological imagery and literary roots, the emotional core of *Composure* is crucial to its accessibility and relevance. In the later stages of writing, I came across a monologue taken from the 1998 play *Crave*, written by Sarah Kane¹². The work is at times opaque, at times painfully open. Her intensity, and the instant connection I felt when reading, demonstrated that emotional rawness need not create a barrier that prevents the audience from engaging, as I had initially feared would hinder my own work. All-consuming, passionate emotions are not necessarily experiences to be hidden or tempered — certainly not in poetry. This realisation allowed me to strip away parts of my work that were superfluous or gratuitously opaque, which I believe vastly improved the overall voice of the suite.

¹¹ *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems*, p. 383

¹² S Kane, *Crave*, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 1998

Composure draws from science, literature, folklore, political issues, and personal experiences; it contains elements accessible to various audiences who do not always overlap. This is deliberate. A significant part of the work's aim is to merge disconnected areas — to fill the lacuna between scientific and artistic thought, individual and social consciousness. Its environmental and political impetus, a call for increased connection and symbiosis with our natural and our social surroundings, would suit it for inclusion in publications such as *Dumbo Feather*, an Australian magazine concerning the environment, and social responsibility. *Composure's* experimental form, and at times unusual subject matter, would be appropriate in collectives such as *Seizure*, whose online platform would render it more accessible to its somewhat niche audiences.

Composure is a strange experience, both in the process of its construction, and observation of the response it provokes. Yet strangeness is necessary. Movement and interaction between seemingly incongruous aspects of the world — between structure and flow, science and art, body and mind, natural and artificial; between lovers, even — this is what creates synergy, and beauty.