

A CAFÉ FILLED WITH LIGHT



Photo of Peter Bishop by Bette Mifsud

There's no limit to the intimacy or to the extent of transactions possible between writer and reader.

I remember writing that sentence—an essay titled 'The Chekhov Team'—and thinking: it could be the touchstone sentence of my life as a writer.

There's another one—in an essay that's about sitting up late, brooding—I was in maybe the bleakest moment of my life—and how I experienced this brooding as a bad weather of the soul—

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And writing: it's all that might come—no boundaries or barriers—from a lifelong commitment to creating and exploring the experience of being and becoming a writer. There's a powerful and scary aloneness about writing. It's not that you're one emperor penguin among the thousands huddled together with eggs on their feet through the endlessness of Arctic night—you're on your own—and

what you're doing might seem just as absurd and unlikely as what the penguins do. Your friends no longer even asking about that egg you've been holding on your foot the last ten years —

Peter Bishop Books, Peter Bishop & Friends—when I think of them I'm imagining a café filled with light—a place with the coffee smell that so enchanted me in my childhood—turning from the bracing wind of the English sea-front into the warmth of a narrow street where my father would demonstrate the miracle of adulthood by ordering a black coffee and the three children would have ice-creams in silver dishes, the yellow wafers set in at an identical angle. A meeting place, a holiday —

...

I'm a familiar figure among the cafés of the upper Blue Mountains. My two cappuccinos, sometimes a muffin or Portuguese tart, toast and marmalade—if the right sort of marmalade is on offer —

To start work about 8.30 or 9, packing up around midday. In my four years at the back table of Café 88 in Katoomba's Lurline St I would have written maybe half a million words. I have them in files on my computer—The Night Theatres, Midnight in the Cinnamon Shops, what I called a winter journal—All's Still To Come, the book that grapples with my long fascination with Russian gloom—To the Temple, Singing—

People would often be curious—what was I writing? A novel—or maybe a memoir? I'd be hesitant. Well—fiction or non-fiction, then—it has to be one or the other! And I'd still be hesitant.

I was coming out of a long time of solitude. The death of my wife Libby early in 2014 was the end of three years where everything about me had been defined by her journey through a condition—Multiple System Atrophy—that doesn't have a map though the end is never in doubt—the journey inexorable and without remission. It sounds grim—but a story has many dimensions —

It's 14th October, Libby's birthday—and as we all know: her last birthday. A day to have a holiday from my writing self, to be among my family, roasting kipfler potatoes, blending pesto...

My writing self—restless always among lives long gone, the ways words and music and the night live outside time—doesn't really know anything about family, or about the pleasure of blackening red capsicums and peeling the skins to make a salad with the softened flesh, adding toasted

pine nuts, garlic crushed with sea-salt, torn basil, olive oil... We eat and chat. Four year-old Sylvie explains a game she plays at Cherry Blossom—Duck Duck Goose. She knows that Libby mustn't be picked for the goose because the goose has to run. But Libby's there in the game, and she's always had—everyone notices it—the loveliest smile. Sylvie touching her face so tenderly as she allows her once again to be a duck—

For the first time in my life—I was just over 60—it was speaking in me boldly and fluently—the writing self—I write late into the nights.

Some nights I'm tired. I ought to go to bed. There's nothing useful happening.

But I sit on. Something's working itself out. You get a feeling for these things.

Sometimes I go outside—the moon in the clear sky behind the dark pine, the late train coming in to the station.

If you asked me what I'm thinking I'd say nothing.

And then out of this nothing something comes. Just like that—a sentence, a paragraph. It could be 500 words before I look up.

So I couldn't have been telling the truth when I told you I was thinking of nothing.

But those 500 words—they don't come from the place where I think things. There's another place.

Maybe this is just the way it is for writers: there's your self that's busy being itself in the world, and there's another self, the writing self.

It's you —it isn't you—it's another you—

That last year of Libby's life I experienced the writing self as an urgent speaking—authoritative, commanding. There's a diary entry from the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva that describes it exactly—

I obey something that sounds within me: all my writing is an attentive listening.

February to August 2013—nights and midnights—I found myself in the midst of what I came to call The Night Theatres —The Middle-Aged and Elderly at the All-Brahms Concert, Bottom's Dream, The Ice Sleep.

It was a writing experience unlike any I'd had before. For most of the day I was caring for Libby—though Libby always insisted I go down the road to my café for at least an hour every day. At 9 each night she'd go to sleep—sleeping always until

PETER BISHOP BOOKS

A specialty imprint of Ventura Press, Peter Bishop Books was launched by Charlotte Wood at Gleebooks in Sydney and plans further launches in Melbourne and the Blue Mountains. The first two titles are companion memoirs by childhood neighbours who grew up in Dallas, Broadmeadows: Nick Gleeson's 'The Many Ways of Seeing' and Caroline van de Pol's 'Back to Broady'. 'The Many Ways of Seeing' is a conversation between Nick, who has been blind since the age of 7, and Peter Bishop.

Peter Bishop & Friends will be a wide-ranging national conversation of writers and readers—a meeting place.

Judith Beveridge's poem 'The Harbour' comes from the collection 'Storm and Honey' (Giramondo, 2009).

Robert Gray's 'Late Ferry' is the first poem in the collection 'Grass Script' (Angus and Robertson, 1978).

There's a powerful and scary aloneness about writing. It's not that you're one emperor penguin among the thousands huddled together with eggs on their feet through the endlessness of Arctic night—you're on your own

1 or 1.30. In the strange companionship of the night—her difficult breathing sounding through the house—I'd sit down at the table—and the curtains of my strange theatre would part—

Sometimes when I'm writing in my café I fall into a light doze. That's when he comes to my table, knowing his moment, always hesitant.

His name—he says it with satisfaction—is Salieri, Antonio Salieri—

I wouldn't know him of course the name won't mean anything to me. And clearly I'm a busy man—a writer, if I'm not mistaken? He's a composer himself. Yes, our whole lives—and don't we know it!—in the service of art: the learning, the practice, the prayer...

And the celibacy, the self-sacrifice, the self-denial! Art is a holy temple—don't I agree? And all that we want, what we deserve—we men of art—is our place in that temple: to be dedicated men among dedicated men...

I always stop him there, waking, and he withdraws, graciously—of course, of course. He knows how precious my time is, he'd hate to intrude...

But maybe—even so—I might come to the moment when perhaps I could hear him out? After all—and he says this always with a certain emphasis—we're fellow artists, fellow supplicants, pilgrims: We can't escape the ties that bind us.

When we're young we enter into a passionate and independent conversation with the world—and it's this conversation—keeping up its fierce independence and energy throughout our lives—that's the heartbeat, the breathing of the writing self.

And through this long time of solitude—the Arctic night, the precious egg full of growing things balancing on the foot—I was dreaming of community—

For 17 years I'd been creative director of Varuna, The Writers' House. The early years of Varuna were an astonishing time of community. I'd never imagined such a thing might be possible—and suddenly—there we were in the middle of it—

And through those early Varuna years another passionate conversation started in me—how such a community might be nurtured, how it might become not an ephemeral but a continuing thing—

And in those years of solitude—the conversation burgeoning in file after file on my computer—so many dreams of community, nurture, cohesion, friendship, growth. At that time I called my dreaming The Writer Conversation.

And now here I am in the first days of Peter Bishop Books, Peter Bishop & Friends—

Thinking of it now—it was a moment of revelation—

though at the time I think I was just pleased and warmed. I'd sent an essay to Jessie Cole—one of the writers who quietly saw to it that my time of solitude wasn't a time of loneliness. And Jessie responded to a passage in the essay with a memory of her own—my words causing the light to fall in a slightly different way in her world so that something that had been in the shadows was now in the surprising light.

And that's the moment when I knew something essential about the community I was dreaming of—the relationship between writer and reader—writer and writer—as a living conversation.

Poets know all about this living conversation—I think immediately of the poem of Judith Beveridge—The Harbour—that's a joyous encounter with the subtle and glorious modulations of air and light and the sea in Robert Gray's Late Ferry—

I'm watching all this from a balcony just as the wind gets up, just as I'm remembering your poem, Robert, about the late ferry crossing the water—and as the light spills intemperately and wantonly as honey.

Peter Bishop Books, Peter Bishop & Friends—a meeting place, a holiday—

When writers get together, what do they talk about? When Robin Hemley—then Director of the Non-Fiction Program at Iowa—first visited Varuna he was amazed—writers talking about writing rather than anxiety! So often—writers so anxious about their careers that even a casual meeting in a supermarket will be a discussion of agents, publishers, opportunities that ought to have materialized but look like they won't.

I can't remember which one of us in the Robin Hemley week made the joke: how it used to be that a writer was expected to exemplify the Socratic dictum: Know thyself! And how nowadays the successful writer is one who heeds its commercial brother: Know thy shelf! And even at the time—laughing together—we knew it wasn't a joke—simply the way things are: you must know exactly on which shelf your book is going to belong—crime, literary, memoir, young adult, self-help—before you start to write it.

So instead of the fearless speaking of the doubting and magnificent unique self a writer must create a self that can promptly answer the question I can only hesitate over, bewilderingly and unpardonably helpless—a writer who can't tell whether he's writing Fiction or Non-Fiction.

What I'm writing is unclassifiable—the lifetime conversation of my writing self. And sitting on this shelf of the bookshop that doesn't yet exist, I'm aware of winks and nods from the shelves marked Literary, Memoir, Philosophy, Poetry. We all belong together, emperor penguins in the Arctic night. And we have our peculiar emperor penguin sense of humour—

The living conversation among writers is about writing—of course it is! And sometimes—blessedly—it's not a conversation about writing—it's an actual conversation of writing—Judith standing on her balcony overlooking the harbour as the wind gets up and thinking of the nocturnal incandescence of Robert's ferry—

*The late ferry is leaving now;
I stay to watch
from the balcony, as it goes up onto
the huge dark harbour,
out beyond that narrow wood jetty—*

And I always experience the last stanza as I experience so much of Robert's and Judith's poetry—as a visitation, a gift—

*I'll lose sight of the ferry soon—
I can see it while it's on darkness,
and it looks like a honeycomb,
filled as it is with its yellow light.*

And Peter Bishop Books, Peter Bishop & Friends—both conversations absolutely at home—the necessary and often thrilling conversation about writing, and the whimsical, magical conversation of writer with writer, writing with writing. There's no limit to the intimacy or to the extent of transactions possible between writer and reader—

The Many Ways of Seeing is an unorthodox memoir, a conversation between Nick Gleeson, who has been blind since the age of 7, and myself, Peter Bishop. At the beginning of the conversation—I remember we were sitting at the big table in the lounge room at Varuna—Nick told me about his recent expedition to the Simpson Desert—his delight in the beautiful footprints of animals on the salt lakes, how he could read them like a Braille map. And later in our conversation he wrote to me about his first solo adventure as a blind boy.

WITH MY CANE I WAS ABLE

I lived at 8 Mclvor Street, Dallas, Broadmeadows, Victoria. Our house was to me like a palace. It had a huge lounge room. Later on I would realize it was not that large—3 bedrooms side by side with a corridor between lounge room and the bedrooms. The corridor ran into a small bathroom with a separate toilet next to it. If you turned right from the corridor you entered another corridor that became the laundry with a door to the backyard. If you kept going straight through the laundry you entered the square kitchen and with a right turn you would be back into the lounge room. This was our house and my playground.

I would find out later that virtually every house in Broadmeadows was the same and that they were more boxes than palaces. And yet—this was our house, our home—the place where the members of my family would try to help each other out in a desperately poor situation.

It was from this front gate that I would take my first steps of independence as an 11 year-old boy who was blind. I had asked my mother if I could walk up the street to the milkbar by myself and I felt her stiffen and the breath pause in her body. I think she knew this day would have to come—and

suddenly it had arrived. She tried gently to dissuade me—there's no hurry to walk to the shops by yourself—but I wasn't going to take no for an answer. There was a big world just waiting for me out there.

So she gave in, with the proviso that I would do everything I was taught about using my cane and if I got lost that I would go into the nearest house for help. The reality was that everyone knew that Maurice and I were blind and looked out for us whenever we were out with our family. Broadmeadows was maybe the roughest suburb in Australia at the time and yet looking back I knew that I had a huge number of people who cared for me. There was something special about the people—I never felt fear as I totally trusted them and I knew they all had amazing character, despite most families living on or below the poverty line.

At 2 pm, with my white cane, I walked out my gate and turned left and started down our street. My first challenge was to walk past three houses to the corner—Kiewa Crescent—which I would need to cross. Tap, tap, tap went my cane as I nervously and excitedly moved forward. I found the corner and the spot I had been shown to use when crossing. I was very careful and waited until there was absolute silence before I crossed the road.

This was the first time since becoming blind that I was walking away from those who cared for me and I did feel some emptiness. It felt like that first time in the water when you discover you can stay afloat. I turned right and past the public phone box—one of the landmarks for my return journey. I had to walk about 250 metres to Blair Street—a major road with traffic lights. My cane made that beautiful resounding noise when it hit the light pole, telling me I was on track. It was way before the days of audio lights, so I would have to judge when to cross the major road by listening carefully to make sure the cars had stopped at the crossing. There was a car at the crossing and I heard it purring as I took those brave steps onto my first busy road. I wonder if that driver had any idea what a momentous occasion this was in my life. What did the drivers think—if they noticed him at all—of this little boy crossing this major road—the first rung on a very long and steep ladder?

My next challenge would be to walk into the open-plan small shopping centre, which had two rows of shops facing each other with a supermarket at the end of the row. This was the supermarket that had taken my sight from me several years earlier. Using my cane I found the row of bollards and the large garden planters, where plants rarely survived. In many ways the lives of those plants reflected the lives of the young people of the suburb—so often never reaching full maturity. To survive in this area whether human or plant—it's an achievement.

Next thing, I found the first shop of the row, a chemist. It was there my sister Donna had bought me a toy monkey that I called Coco. She gave me Coco when I came home from the hospital, having lost my sight. He had tartan pants and matching coat, a furry head and a banana in his hand that could be placed in his mouth by bending his arm. He was so tactile, with the best set of ears and feet I have ever felt. He was a good friend in those early days of blindness and someone I could share my 7 year-old fears with, and in my mind he understood. Coco now lives with my brother Maurice and is a fine example of how to survive the challenges of Broadmeadows!

I passed about five shops and turned in to where I thought the milk bar would be. I remember how I said it under my breath as I pushed the door—Please, please let it be my shop—

The bell rang and joy flooded through my small body. It's hard to explain, but it felt as if I now had some say in the direction I was taking in life and that I could do it by myself. In my excitement I did bump into the stand holding the loaves of bread but it didn't matter. I was homing in on the counter like an unstoppable missile.

I had been in this milkbar many times before—mostly with my Dad. I'd sneak my small hand up to his pocket and if I felt coins that meant he was rich and I would ask him for a treat. It never really occurred to me that these coins might be the only money he had to his name. My Dad was one of the most generous people ever born, and so often to his—and to our—detriment he would show this generosity to anyone who asked him for help.

My cane gently found the glass display counter and I heard the voice of Mr Abyad—Hello young man, how can I help you? And I said in the biggest voice I could muster—Could I please have twenty cents of mixed soft lollies?

I could hear him putting different lollies into a bag. I remembered the white paper bags from my sighted days four years earlier. But when he handed me the bag I was surprised—too big a bag for twenty cents worth and twenty cents was all I had in my pocket! Mr Abyad—I stammered—you've given me a forty-cent bag!

His reply was cheerful—Ah, I thought you said forty cents—but since I've given them to you already, you only need to give me twenty cents! I knew by his smiling voice that he'd deliberately made up the bigger bag and this kindness is always in my thoughts when I remember that momentous trip to the milkbar.

I turned and realized that there was the journey home still to accomplish, so I had to concentrate. But I did take a slight detour after leaving the shop, as I remembered from years ago that there was a small concrete elephant, probably two feet tall. I wondered if I could find her—I was always so sure it was a she! I used to climb on her and pretend I was in Africa. I swept my cane from side to side in a wide arc and bang!—there she was, waiting for me to climb on her again. This day because of my newly discovered confidence I pretended I was riding through the jungle all by myself, waving my cane. This would be my last ride on Crazy and I imagine she has long gone from her place at the shopping centre.

Retracing my steps I found the traffic lights and started walking down Kiewa Crescent. So many people seemed to be standing outside their homes saying hello to me and wishing me all the best. There was John, who always had old cars in his front yard and always seemed to be yelling at everyone. He was always friendly to me though—and on this day he called out, Go champion!

One of the Mums came out her gate—Mrs Turner who had heaps of her own children—and gave me a hug—Are you okay? I thought it was a bit odd as they seemed to be almost lining the street. On my return journey I remember once or twice walking off the pathway onto the nature strip, but quickly correcting myself, hoping that no one would see this small mistake. My concentration was very intense the further I went along the Crescent as I had to make sure I found the telephone box. I'd been taught to use object perception,

sometimes known as shadow vision—using my hearing to sense a large object like the telephone box, as the sound waves would bounce back to me. It was like driving a car—and I hoped that I had not missed the turn-off—and yes, there was lots of anxiety in my body, not that I would have admitted it to anyone. If I missed the phone box landmark turn-off, I would disappear into unfamiliar territory and I knew it would be very hard to find the way back!

But I found the telephone box and found the place to cross into our street. As I walked down Mclvor Street, I heard someone pass me on the grass and thought it a little strange that they did not speak to me. Next thing, there was Val Egan calling out from her verandah—Nicky, well done love, we're all so proud of you! I waved to Val—with my left hand as of course I was the true professional, using my cane all the way! I found the Wilsons' front fence—a helpful fence as it was the only one made of brick in the street and right next to our house. I knew I was on the brink of an amazing successful homecoming and I tried not to relax too much until it was achieved.

Next thing there was Mum, hugging me, trying not to cry but I felt her tears and her smiles, one after the other—so that when I'd say—Mum, don't cry—she could say—I'm not crying, I'm laughing!

My hand reaching to that small face found tears and heard loving laughter—and of course I made light of the whole adventure—It was easy, it was nothing! However, in my heart I knew it had been quite a scary challenge.

It was probably about a year later that Mum confessed that she'd been three steps behind me all the way—that she'd called Mr Abyad to say I was coming—and that the neighbours suddenly appearing on my return journey had all wanted to be part of this momentous time in my life. And of course it was my Mum who ran past me in my street to get home before me. The pieces of the jigsaw all fell into place!

I look back now and realize how fortunate I was to have such a Mum. In hindsight, I realize my Mum's health was rapidly failing and she herself had severe vision loss—and yet she'd stalked me up and back like a protective, proud lioness.

It would only be four years after this day that I would hear my Dad saying to me, Nick, Mum died this morning—and inwardly everything would crash and bounce in my brain and body. I'd stand still, unable to move... And I'd notice the smell of mandarine—there must have been a box of them in the room where my Dad told me the devastating news.

The scent of that fruit always takes me back to that cold July morning and that terrible moment. I didn't cry—but an invisible wall encircled me and I would not allow the dreadful pain to hurt me. This wall would be suddenly erected many times later in my life when trauma occurred.

If I could, and if there was a nomination for the world's best Mum, I would nominate her immediately and know she would win hands down. Mum—thank you for everything. You were the brave one, the one who showed true courage, and I was so very sad despite showing a brave front to the rest of the world when you died. I thought I had to be strong and not cry—be a man and tough it out.

Later in life, I would receive counselling to cope with the many times after that first time I slammed the door shut on the traumatic things of life. I encourage others to seek assistance when necessary and to form close friendships. It is friendship that can save lives.