

little jokes that nobody but me will understand¹

for Nicholas Jose

Moya Costello

The dissuasion of my brother (uncompleted)



Two Children (after Russell Drysdale), G. H. Gill

‘There has been perhaps been a mistake — but of no great importance — in the denomination of this picture.’²

Here I open my story the way my writer–brother opened his story “The Drover’s Wife” — but accompanied by a different picture.

The two children are not simply anonymous children. No — they are siblings: my brother and myself.

The two children are also the protagonists in my writer–brother’s short story “The Seduction of My Sister”.³

In the picture above, we are standing in front of the vacant block in our street, unkempt and dried out from the Adelaide summer. It is where Gordon Gills’s family would build their house. I hold my mouth slightly open; I am readying to take an interest in, to be taken an interest in by our new neighbour Gordon, when the family visited their newly purchased vacant block. My brother is turning me away from that opportunity.

My brother hardly ever spoke to me, and then only to chastise me. He became a writer. He wrote in his novels *The Pages*: ‘much of what composed the world was unsayable’,⁴ and in *The Voyage*: ‘Most things are not worth saying, yet continue to be said’.⁵ But what can’t be said can be written. In “Seduction” he wrote that he couldn’t remember anything I said,⁶ and while the protagonist in *Voyage* had a sister who talked volubly, that protagonist regarded everything she said to be of little interest;⁷ in his diary, *Notebooks*: ‘Some people I hardly know at all. My brothers, my sister’.⁸

My brother is never captured — in any portrait: painting, drawing or photograph — smiling. One portrait is titled *Erased Portrait of Murray Bail*,⁹ making it impossible to see any distinct features, let alone the orientation of his mouth.

My brother says in “Seduction” that I ‘had short hair and a fringe’,¹⁰ and, in his memoir, *He.*, that ‘[h]aircuts were done by his father’.¹¹ You can see from the picture above that both these statements are factual. My brother is dark-haired (look up any image of him). And I, well, Helen Garner, my brother’s second wife, and her third husband, mentioned in her third diary that I was ‘fair’ when she met me in Perth.¹²

My brother’s overshirt and undershirt are hand-me-downs from our father who once worked on a cattle/sheep station in the outback, or so my brother says of our father’s employment history in “Seduction”, and his memoir.¹³ In “Seduction”, my brother then says that our father worked at an Anglo-American tobacco company: it was a time, as he says in his memoir, when ‘[a]lmost every man was a smoker’.¹⁴

In “Seduction”, he gives our father the name ‘Reg’, when it was Cyril,¹⁵ but our mother had a brother named Reg,¹⁶ and in *Holden’s Performance* he gave Holden Shadbolt’s father the name Reg.

My dress is from Myer’s where my mother worked (at least in fiction; her work in fact was as a milliner; she also did flowers for the church).¹⁷ I wore the dress for the arrival of Gordon. All my dress-ups were for Gordon.

You can also see that I am cultivating — or my mother is, through her working-life at Myers — a feminine aesthetic, with the innocent pertness of a Peter-Pan collar.

My dress determinedly foreshadows my iconic white, translucent cotton party dress in which Gordon was smothered when my brother threw the dress, with me in it, across our suburban street from our house to his. In my writer–brother’s memoir, he wrote that in our garage was ‘a pile of boomerangs from when [our] father worked on a cattle station ... He ... sent one over the roof where waiting on the lawn in a crouching position was the boy across the street’.¹⁸

The picture featured in my brother's story ...

In his writing there are many sisters

His mother had two sisters; he had one sister.¹⁹

A sister, Glenys, appears in his short stories “Seduction”, and “Healing” in which the brother Hedley rides Glenys on the handlebars of his bicycle. He rode a bicycle (see his memoir). A brother and sister are in a segment of “Huebler”.²⁰ Karen is Holden’s sister in his novel *Holden’s Performance*, and the Sprunt sisters appear in *Eucalyptus* in which Ellen’s mother had several sisters, and the postmistress is the sister of a postie.²¹ Lindsey is the sister of the brothers Antill, all characters in *Pages* in which it is also noted that sisters follow each other into therapy.²² The sister in *Voyage* is Jo for Joan, and two (unnamed) sisters are on the voyaging ship. In his memoir, he mentions growing up with the ‘Stewart sisters, Nancy and Jean’, brushing the hair of a woman in hospital the day before she died, ‘[s]he who lived with her sister’, and his Uncle Frank living with his sister.²³

The fathers

Both he and Garner had difficult relations with their fathers.

His father, at the age of eight, lost his mother. Consequently, his father ‘went inward early’, he says in his memoir; of himself he says that ‘[a]ged twelve he already ha[d] a certain earnestness’ and later that ‘emotional distance’ is his ‘general state’, and though hardening ‘him unnecessarily ... [f]inally, he understood it to be a form of cheap protection’.²⁴ In her third diary, Garner notes his sister saying that he was ‘always in trouble with their father’ who she described as ‘a tyrant and a disciplinarian’.²⁵ When he shows Garner a photograph of his father, she reacts: ‘his face ... hard, clamped, full of some terrible inward-turned power — like someone who could have died of bottled-up emotion’.²⁶ She hears him on the phone describing *her* father as a ‘barbarian’.²⁷

Garner’s father, at the age of two, lost his mother. As a consequence, he had ‘severe convulsions’ that required hospitalisation.²⁸

Ellen’s father, in *Eucalyptus*, attempts to marry Ellen off in a competition, yet he described Ellen’s mother’s father as being ‘a really poor low-grade example of what a father should be’.²⁹

In *Notebooks* and his memoir, he says of his father’s friends: ‘I don’t recall any’.³⁰ I remember well my father’s friends: KH, PB, RB and RD.

The naming of his characters

His mother's name was Hazel. The wife in Henry Lawson's original story, "The Drover's Wife", remained unnamed. In his story "Drover's Wife", the wife is Hazel, and the narrator, Gordon, is a dentist (emphatically not a drover). And according to the dentist–narrator, Hazel is not the wife of the drover, but, rather, the dentist–narrator's wife — and Hazel has left the dentist–narrator.

He has two brothers. His younger brother worked in the Dental Corps in the Vietnam War. There is a dentist in his novel *Homesickness*: Kenneth Hoffman. His elder brother is Trevor. When Hazel (the Hazel in his story referred to above, not the Hazel in his family), leaves the family home, she also leaves a note for her husband, the dentist–narrator, telling him, as Trevor's father, about her son: 'Don't give Trevor any carrots'.³¹ Erica *Hazelhurst* is a character in *Pages*.

Trevor's, his brother (not the Trevor in in his story referred to above), second name is Lindsay; his father was (Cyril) Lindsay Bail. Moreover, in his short story "Huebler", there is a Cyril Lindsay Roberts who has three daughters and one son, whereas Cyril Lindsay Bail had three sons and one daughter, and Huebler is Douglas Huebler, named in the story as such and a photographer, which Huebler was. Lindsey 'with an *e*'³² is the spelling emphasised by a minor character in *Pages*. In "Seduction", the sister is belatedly named once by the new neighbour: *Glenys* which could've readily been spelt *Glynis*. In *Homesickness*, the Cathcart's daughter is Glenys. His sister is Lyn.

In "Seduction", the new residents in the suburban street, the 'Gills', breathe life into the fusty, stilted street.

Drusilla Modjeka, a friend of his, called herself *Lalage* in her fictional biography *Poppy*.³³ In *Voyage*, the protagonist is Frank *Delage*.

He noted in his memoir that he had an 'uncle' Frank. Frank is also the Christian name of McBee, a father-substitute, in his novel *Holden's Performance*. My father's name was Frank.

He said to Garner that he didn't like his Christian name. When she asked why he wouldn't change it, he stated 'Cause that's who you *are*'.³⁴ Garner (née Ford) changed her surname on her first marriage to her 'grown-up name'.³⁵ In *He.*, he wrote: 'He was given the Christian name of his father's younger brother'.³⁶ A brother of his father married a Josephine Ford.

As with Gill, his characters' names are puns and symbols; also, the same characters reappear in his fictions: '[r]epetitions are worth studying (in literature)' he says in

Notebooks.³⁷ Kaddok is a character associated with photography in *Homesickness*; Kodak is a company associated with photography in the real world. Gary Atlas, you can imagine. In *Holden's Performance*, Holden Shadbolt is a mechanical being; Shadbolt is, most suitably, an engineering solutions company of mechanical things, established in 1981, before the Holden Shadbolt of the 1985 publication. Vern Hartnett is Holden's uncle and another father substitute. Laurence John Hartnett was an engineer who is known as "the father" of the Holden car. Gordon Wheelwright is a rubbish collector, Les Flies a tram driver; Mrs Younghusband's husband died a young man in World War 11; Screech owns the Epic Theatre where he gives speeches before the screening of newsreels; Colonel Light, used to staring at maps, is chief of the bodyguard team that Holden joined, while the real Colonel Light was the surveyor of Adelaide, the town where Holden was born; Rust is the team's equipment officer, and Polaroid the surveillance officer. Colonel Light drove a Vauxhall; in his memoir he says his father drove a Vauxhall. A character named Zoellner appears in his short story "Zoellner's Definition"; Biv appears in "Cu-de-Sac (uncompleted)",³⁸ Zoellner and Biv reappear in *Homesickness*,³⁹ and Zoellner again in *Pages*. Mondrian, the real painter, not one of his characters, is referred to in both *Holden's Performance* and *Pages*; in those two novels, as well as *Eucalyptus*, women wear clothes of green and/or rhubarb.⁴⁰

Harriet Chandler is briefly Holden's paramour, and in my novella, *Harriet Chandler*, I briefly speculated where her name may have come from: Beecher Stowe's stance against slavery (I make her parents left-wing), or Backer, the Norwegian impressionist (Chandler is a visual artist).⁴¹ I have Harriet herself speculate that, in some woefully failed anagram, her name may have come from a combination of Hurtle and Courtney and Rhoda and Duffield, from a novel by Patrick White whom he knew. Or it's HC, because Holden Shadbolt, initials HS, can't be Holden Caufield (protagonist in *Catcher in the Rye*, published 1951, initials HC), but Harriet can be. Or Harriet's precursor could be *Harriet the Spy* published 1964, because it's then a joke about Harriet Chandler's *femme-fatale* status with the bodyguard team in *Holden's Performance*, coupled with the iconic status of Chandler writer of detective fiction. I give Harriet a friend: Amirah Soul (a mirror soul). I had originally named Amirah Soul otherwise, but the otherwise-name belonged to a real person who contacted me saying I had stolen her identity (when the manuscript went online). It turned out that, when we met, she did not look like Harriet's friend as I had imagined her ... but Harriet herself. In his short story "Home Ownership", a character, Joyce, grows cacti.⁴² My mother's name was Joyce but she didn't grow cacti. I had Harriet grow cacti, because my mother-in-law grew cacti. I named Harriet's mother Joyce.

In *Eucalyptus*, Holland and Mr Cave are metaphorically blind and dark respectively, while Ellen means light. In his memoir, he notes this '[e]arliest memory': 'honey-coloured light coming in through the holland blind'.⁴³

In *Pages*, Erica is a philosopher, and there have been several philosophers whose Christian name was Eric; Sophie is a psychologist, and sophistry means using false argument. Cynthia Blackman is a photographer in *Pages*, when Barbara was the wife of Charles Blackman and Cynthia the wife of Sidney Nolan, both Australian painters. The Antill's solicitor has clients similarly named in landscape terms: Mound and Pineless (this latter with the Christian name Murray); the Antill's father's Christian name: Cliff.⁴⁴

The deciphering of alphabetical letters for not-naming

He is V in the Garner diaries; I don't know who the V is in his diaries (one vague possibility is Vincent Smith, a correspondent and publisher of his work). Garner is referred to once by her full name, but mostly by she/her (I presume) in his memoir,⁴⁵ with one possible exception: H, which could rather be Hazel, his mother, or Helen Daniel, his literary critic.

In Bail's diaries and memoir, I have very little idea for whom the alphabet letters stand.

A, AR, B, C, CM, CB, CS, D, DG, E, F, FMc,
FW,G, GG, H, HM,HR, JB, LB, JM,
M, MD, N, P, PH, PN, PP, R, RF, RH, RK,
RM, RMcC, RP, S, T, TB, TD, TS, V, WS⁴⁶

I believe they are the actual initials of the people referred to. Possibly C is the initial of his father, Cyril; PP of Peter Porter, RH Rodney Hall — but the circumstances in which they are mentioned in the diaries don't readily equate with them. He notes in his memoir that, of the time before his birth, children were given names like Cyril. RH could also be Robert Haupt a correspondent of Bail. FW and JB are the painters Fred Williams and John Brack; LB is the painter Lina Bryans; MD is quite probably Maisie Drysdale, M for Margaret his first wife, and one of the Ss for Shirley Hazzard. Hazzard calls him Abu Ben Bail in a letter.⁴⁷ P could possibly be his brother Peter. D is probably David Malouf because they see the movie *Gettysburg* together, and Malouf once commented on the Gettysburg address,⁴⁸ but that's another story

In Garner's diaries, X may be Aida Tomescu (where X can mean a kiss or the unknown, secrecy, danger, the end); Susan Wyndham⁴⁹ suggested convincingly villain for V (Bail) (Can't be victory?) and Zeus Z for Malouf. Y: editor Di Gribble.

The mother of Karen and Holden Shadbolt in *Holden's Performance* is never named, but she is falsely told by her lover, McBee, who becomes such after her husband's death on Les Flies's tram, that his motorbike, AJS, is named after her, when it is the brand name. I speculated in *Harriet Chandler*: 'A could stand for Ann? Alice? Aurora? Aphrodite? A[i]da?'⁵⁰

Who am I to him or he to me ...?

My mother was a milliner; she also did flowers for the church.

He has three siblings. He is a middle child. I have three siblings. I am a middle child.

I went into therapy, and my sisters followed.

The Cathcarts grew their family up in the inner-western Sydney suburb of Drummoyne. I grew up in Drummoyne.

I've been told that J M Coetzee got Elizabeth's (protagonist in his novel *Elizabeth Costello*) surname from the time I had a pigeon-hole near his (above, below or next to) at UA, an academic institution. I subtitled my novella *The House on Kangaroo Street* where Harriet lived, according to *Holden's Performance*, knowing that Elizabeth Costello had written *The House on Eccles Street*, where Molly Bloom lived according to James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*. The following is my take on my surname namesake's summarised resume in *Elizabeth Costello*:⁵¹

Moya Costello is a writer, born in 1952, which makes her seventy-one years old, going on seventy-two. She has written two novels, one book of poems, two books of short prose and a body of scholarly articles. By birth she is Australian. She was born in Sydney and no longer lives there, though she spent two years in Melbourne, twenty-three years in Adelaide and twelve in the Northern Rivers. She has never married. She has one step-daughter.

Moya Costello made her name with ... ? In the past decade there has grown up around her a quark-sized critical industry; there isn't a Moya Costello Society based anywhere, so a quarterly *Moya Costello Newsletter* has never been put out.

In her second diary, Garner recorded him saying: 'I have fought my habit of putting in little jokes that nobody but me will understand for fifty years'.⁵² That was in 1988. Over

thirty years have ensued since then. I write this piece in 2022-2023, though I was alert to jokes in my reading of his writing years before now. I haven't done too badly ... but there are more I haven't mentioned, some I can't explain, some I may have misinterpreted, some missed ...

Moya Costello [BIO] Moya Costello's books: two collections of short creative prose, two short novels, one collection of prose poems, with critical and creative work in scholarly and literary journals, anthologies, textbooks, exhibition catalogues. Taught writing at Southern Cross University, now an Adjunct Lecturer. Received writing grants and guest spots at several writers' festivals, judged many writing competitions, read her work at many venues. PhD, creative writing, University of Adelaide. Living on the lands of the punnilerpanna people (Tasmania/lutruwita, Australia). www.moyacostello.com

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- ¹ Murray Bail in Helen Garner, *One Day I'll Remember This: Diaries Volume II 1987-1995* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2020), 133.
- ² Murray Bail, "The Drover's Wife" in *The Drover's Wife and Other Stories* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1998), 25.
- ³ Bail, "The Seduction of My Sister" in *Camouflage* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2000), 41.
- ⁴ Bail, *The Pages* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2009), 16.
- ⁵ Bail, *The Voyage*, (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2012), 2.
- ⁶ "Seduction", 45.
- ⁷ *Voyage*, 5.
- ⁸ Bail, *Notebooks 1970-2003* (London: Harvill 2005), 188.
- ⁹ Imants Tillers, *Erased Portrait of Murray Bail*, private collection, 1985.
- ¹⁰ "Seduction", 45.
- ¹¹ Bail, *He.*, (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2021), 28.
- ¹² Garner, *How to End a Story: Diaries Volume III 1995-1998* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2021), 191.
- ¹³ "Seduction", 64; *He.*, 141.
- ¹⁴ *He.*, 35.
- ¹⁵ This and similar sourced from South Australian Genealogy & Heraldry Society Inc, and Ancestry.com.
- ¹⁶ *He.*, 21.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 141.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 21, 2.
- ²⁰ Bail, "The Seduction of My Sister", "Huebler", "Healing", *Drover's Wife*.
- ²¹ Murray Bail, *Eucalyptus* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1998), 12, 199.
- ²² *Pages*, 167.
- ²³ *He.*, 23, 69, 6.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 32, 1, 128.
- ²⁵ *How to End a Story*, 191.
- ²⁶ *One Day*, 93.
- ²⁷ *How to End a Story*, 75.
- ²⁸ Bernadette Brennan, *A Writing Life: Helen Garner and Her Work* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2017), 85-86.
- ²⁹ *Eucalyptus*, 19.
- ³⁰ *Notebooks*, 213; *He.*, 11.
- ³¹ "Drover's", 26.
- ³² *Pages*, 19.
- ³³ Drusilla Modjeska, *Poppy* (Ringwood: McPhee Gribble/Penguin, 1990)
- ³⁴ Helen Garner, *Yellow Notebook: Diaries Volume I 1978-1987*, (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2019), 238.
- ³⁵ Brennan, 24.
- ³⁶ *He.*, 120.
- ³⁷ *Notebooks*, 202.
- ³⁸ See *Drover's*.
- ³⁹ Murray Bail, *Homesickness* (Sydney: Macmillan, 1980).
- ⁴⁰ *Holden*, 165; *Pages*, 18; *Eucalyptus*, 214.
- ⁴¹ Moya Costello, *Harriet Chandler* (Lismore: Short Odds Publications, 2014), 7-8.
- ⁴² *Drover's*.
- ⁴³ *He.*, 24-25.
- ⁴⁴ *Pages*, 19, 21.
- ⁴⁵ *He.*, 96.
- ⁴⁶ See "A,B,C,D,E,F,G,H,I,J,K,L,M,N,O,P,Q,R,S,T,U,V,W,X,Y,Z" in *Drover's*.
- ⁴⁷ Shirley Hazzard letter to Murray Bail, 10 Dec 1978. Papers of Murray Bail, National Library of Australia, MS 6645. Box 4, Folder 7..
- ⁴⁸ *Notebooks*, 245.
- ⁴⁹ From a Twitter conversation, 2022.
- ⁵⁰ *Harriet*, 120.
- ⁵¹ J M Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*, (Sydney: Knopf, 2003), 1.
- ⁵² *One Day*, 133.